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HIROYUKI HAMADA BLOG

An Interview with Ted Larsen

June 16, 2014
Hiroyuki Hamada



Ted Larsen *Lean on Me* and *Structured Space, Happenstance, or Whatever Makes You Feel Good* (Installation View)

I first became familiar with Ted Larsen's work through art fairs. I am not a big fan of art fairs for many reasons which I won't get into here but I have been to some of them. Ted's works at the fairs were not big flashy pieces; they were modestly sized and rather quiet. But they all had very solid presences to stop me and to make me want to ask about the artist. And I had asked about Ted Larsen not once but probably at least three times at different fairs before I solidly registered his name in my head to make me go "oh that's the artist I like" when I see the work. That might sound like I have no brain to memorize or his works are so unmemorable. Of course that is not my intention.

The point I'm making is that it is close to impossible for me to come out remembering names or the works by particular people from going through numbers of art fairs which include thousands of art works in less than ideal viewing conditions. After a while, many works get categorized and generalized into certain types with generally unflattering connotations in my head. But good works by good artists do stand out repeatedly even if they are rather rare. Ted's work was one of those. The work projects a recognizable atmosphere with its very efficient, smooth and potent visual narratives, most of them are very brief, economical and most of all very effective.

I became his facebook friend. And I have been fascinated by his process and the works, which are more complex, more diverse in varieties and larger both in the presence and the size than the ones I saw at the fairs. My interest in his work has been growing. He's agreed to be interviewed here and I am very happy.

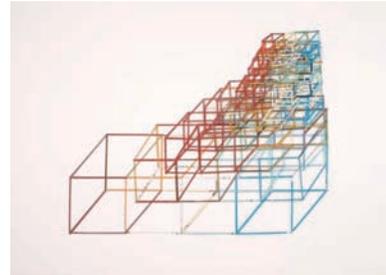
Hiroyuki Hamada: So, Ted, how do you define “art” in a few sentences?

Ted Larsen: Limiting my response to what defines art feels like limitations on the definition of art and let me say, I abhor anything which limits art. So let me back up before I begin.

I don’t like art fairs either. I understand they have become a necessary venue for dealers, but the art fair itself poses considerable problems to the viewer. To discover the truth in a work of art one must slow down. Before I describe what art may be, let me say that it is often not found by going quickly, in loud environments, and with many people around. Potentially art might exist in other situations, like noisy, fast, crowded circumstances, but art fairs frequently do something else to art; they degrade it. For me the basic problem with art fairs is that they are designed to be fast. The best gallery spaces on the other hand are created to be slow. These are interesting problems for which dealers have to contend; artists don’t have to do this work. They have their own work to accomplish. Because most of the artists I know work by themselves and at a slow pace, the work they make must likewise be taken in slowly. (As a caveat, it is possible to become proficient at viewing artwork at art fairs, it would just take time to develop that skill for that environment. Personally, I don’t have the time on hand to develop that skill.)

This brings up a second and important other situation for art. The best galleries know how to “own” their spaces. Because they work in them everyday, they have a certain knowledge of how the space works with art. Art fairs don’t generally allow for this kind of working relationship.

More importantly, a well developed and mature artist knows how important it is for them to own their “space.”



**Ted Larsen, *Single Copy*,
Salvaged steel and rivets**

What I mean is this type of artist understands how important it is to be informed by their own work. The work becomes the artist’s master, giving them directions, requirements, and the terrain it must inhabit. The artist must become a scholar of their work. I am talking about the architecture of the work: its underpinnings, its foundation. This is the conceptual element which must be developed before work can be created successfully. The best art is created with a deep understanding of what it is attempting to accomplish. This gets to the first part of the conversation, what is art?

I believe “art” is something which exists between the viewer and the artwork. It is enigmatic. The artist brings to the work all of their background and life while likewise, the viewer brings their own life and history. Each element in this dance may not know about the other. The commonality is the artwork, which the viewer interprets through their own personal understanding. The more narrowly the artist chooses to focus their work, the more didactic it may become. The opposite holds true as well. By this I mean, if the artist works in a very open-ended and broad fashion, it leaves more room for interpretation. Issues around craftsmanship, skill, narration, form, media, style, genre, theory, and purpose are all focusing lenses. They may or may not add to the interpretation of the artwork. The condition of the viewer may add every bit as much as these lenses do. Great art exists in a timeless way, it lives beyond any one particular condition or state. It speaks to the individual as much as it does to the universal. It is alive and always open to interpretation.

HH: I like your description which brings the art in between the viewer and the art object itself and the addition of the word "enigmatic". I very much agree. And obviously the width and the depth of the description imply the complexity of art and in turn the enormous complexity of the making process.

In one of your previous interviews you talked about setting limits in your making process in order to work more intuitively. Initially, I found it odd to limit the process but I quickly realized that we all put limits by having our own styles, approaches, materials, fields, numbers of components we work with and etc. I found it very instructive that you are conscious about this adjustment process in order to be productive while allowing yourself to grow as an artist. Are there any other things you have in mind to facilitate the complicated process of making?

TL: In the interview with Lynette Haggard (2010) I talked about some strategies of my creative process. I sometimes employ a rules based system in which I create games. These are ways of working. Working as an effect on the worker. While I cannot predict the effect on other people, I wonder what the effect of working will be on me. So I create rules based games for making work. I am interested in what I will discover about my nature in this process. I often work with serialized form and repetitive elements, compounding them to create new, unpredicted outcomes. Working this way means I wind up doing a lot of repetitive work. I create rules for this work to see how doing the work will effect me. Some of the rules might involve long periods of time while others involve significant amounts of unvarying procedures.

An example of working over a period of time was the development of the Serial Killer Project (2012). I created an object which I knew precisely how long each one would take to build. It was a serialized form: a ziggurat-shaped, horizontally-stepped structure. Taking this form as a base unit, I decided I would make multiples of this form. It was a highly repetitive process in which making the 27 total pieces took almost 7 months, one each 5 day week (I took the weekends off!). It was kind of like being a factory worker. It was a very blue-collar kind of process where everyday, at the same time each day I would be doing the same thing as other days. I thought it would drive me nuts and at points it nearly did! However, along the way, with the decision making component removed from the work, it became quite meditative and peaceful. It was a confrontation of my nature to play this particular game.

Lately I have been thinking about architecture and real-estate. The ideas, theories, and constructs which the artist builds the artwork upon are critical; think of this as the architecture. Critically they form what will evolve in every step in making the work. This is the content issue. But there is something even below the the architecture: the real-estate. While artists are concerned with creating new architecture, I don't believe enough of them consider the terrain where it exists. It is my belief that artists need to find a way to "own" the entire place where their work resides. This is the context issue. Where the work is seen can alter how the work is seen and what is understood about the work. It can also inform the architecture of the work. They work hand in hand. If we separate them, they feel foreign from one another. There is heavy coding and semiotics in this way of thinking.

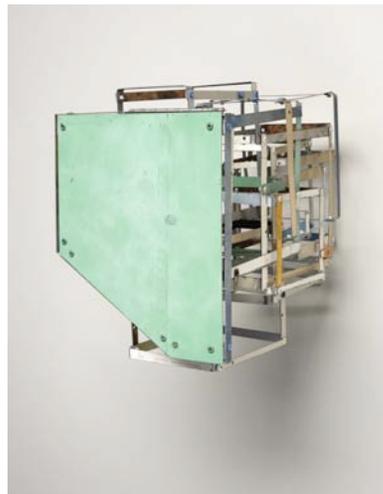
HH: That's really eye opening that you put 9-5 schedule in the making process. I thought I became an artist so that I didn't have to do that. Ha ha. I'd be killed many times in the repetitive process. Pretty funny title. I like how playful and free you are. Also, I understand that repetition can sometimes get us into an intuitive mode. It can be a gateway to the unknown as we see it used in religious rituals or music. It allows us to be connected to the selected parts while allowing us to be very sensitive to the special dynamics among the components we work with. Are there any other things you do to stay in that mode?

Also, I hear you about the context. Some artists end up having their own spaces to show to make sure the context is right–Noguchi comes to my mind. Do you have any particular ideas in how to ensure that the work has the right context?

TL: The strange thing about being an artist for me is how it mixes the blue-collar-construction-type-of-worker with the poet/philosopher. I really resonate with how Carl Andre described his status as worker-artist. Most of the artist practices (if you don't mind my calling it that) I admire are fairly labor-intensive, even if they don't appear to have much labor involved in the work. I also like that we call it "work." The 9-5 workday that I developed for the Serial Killer Project was made to reinforce the "work" aspect of making "work." Otherwise and generally I don't really follow that regime!

I find that I am best able to make critical, creative decisions for about 4 hours a day. I have also found I am at my best in the morning. I generally get into the studio sometime near 8am, but I work through the afternoon. Lucky for me, a good bit of my work is labor intensive and doesn't require my full creative attention. There is always wood which needs milling; steel which needs processing; or cleaning the space for a safe environment to work. I make most of the important considerations in the morning while I am fresh and leave the hard labor, (milling, welding, grinding, sanding, processing materials) for the afternoon. Finding that first step into the work can be a slow process. It also takes me many weeks and sometimes months to fully understand the work. I have to live with it in the studio long enough for me to be impartial to it in order to successfully evaluate the work.

Over my almost 28 years of being an artist I have discovered many things about myself. Some of my insights I accept and some of them I push back against. I don't really try to stay in any particular "mode" as you put it. Maybe I am just always in that mode (which can be problematic!!!) I guess one thing I definitely do is not to overwork. Doing that just makes the whole of my decision-making process muddled and slow. In the middle of the day, I take the dog for a walk. In the early morning during the summer and early fall I often go for long mountain bike rides outside of town. If I don't get out for early AM rides I take one at the end of the day.



Ted Larsen, *Past is Prologue*, 2010.

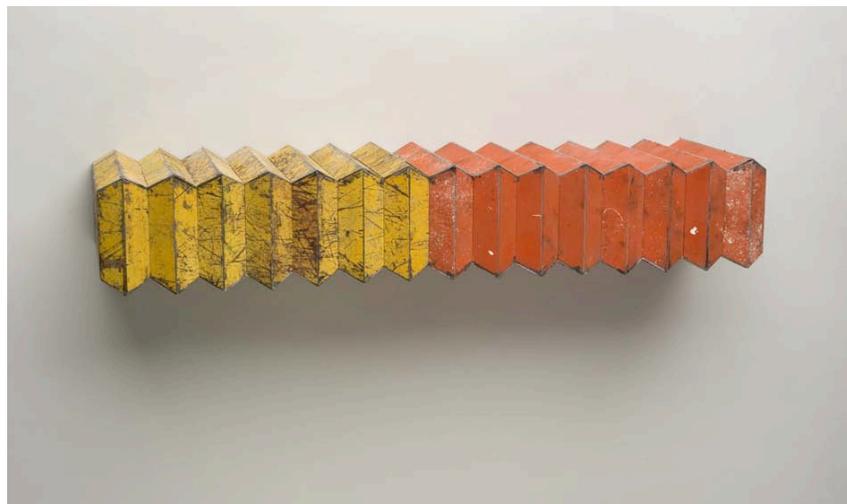
In the winter, I often take a day away from work to go skiing. For me these activities are like moving meditations. I can find solutions and working strategies in these situations. Like I said, finding the first step into the work can be a slow process, and I may not find it sitting in the studio.

I am searching for something in my work which I find somewhat inexplicable. I choose not to over-evaluate what that discovery may be, and I have also decided not to add words to something which is non-verbal. I am not a fan of the current moment's drive to have the artist articulate all things in their work. I think it is fine to talk about the systems we make to work within, but to describe the nature of the work itself presents problems. That said, part of the joy of being an artist is knowing the long and beautiful history we are apart of; therefore, it is incumbent on all artists to know that history.

For me, context is much more than the place where the work is installed. Context is the place where the work “lives.” It is the conceptual environment and not just the theories in the work. It is the whole field of what we consider in making the work. We need to “own” it thoroughly. We cannot afford to abdicate any portion of that real-estate when it informs what we make. This is part of the discovery we are involved with in making the work.

That said, context is also the place where the work is installed. Sure, work could be placed in coffee shops, restaurants, very commercially-driven galleries, at street fairs, and many other like-places. Nothing is wrong with any of these places generally, but something might be incorrect with these places specifically. Choices have to be made. (Choosing can be difficult!) Finding an appropriate place to install work sometimes means having to wait to exhibit work, saying no to certain places, and not working with certain people. It is important to remember content and context are always in conversation. They influence one another. A wrong or inappropriate place to install work does contribute information to its content.

HH: Hmm... I've been suspecting that perhaps I might be somewhat lazy and your account seems to make a strong case for it. You are disciplined! My argument against that has always been that it is hard to know when to dive in. But surely you've also pointed out the importance of taking time to examine before you start and the difficulty of it... I'll have to keep in mind what you said about the studio practice. By the way, I just noticed something interesting. I always find it really special, fun and engaging to talk to artists who's work I enjoy and who's process I can relate to. I've had many such interactions with artists, writers, composers and etc., when I used to attend art residencies a lot. We knew the basic concepts through what we do in our studios and we could start the conversation immediately. As I read your reply, I notice that I am enjoying our differences more than what we have in common. I think that's quite significant when in many social occasions we try to find things we share, and quite often, slight differences we find can antagonize the atmosphere, seemingly without any good reasons.



I guess I brought that up because I'm increasingly aware of what art can do to our societies. Something positive, you know? And understanding each other through art while accepting our differences can be one of the ways, I guess. And that also relate to your notion about the context. Our culture, our community and our various social settings can definitely be parts of our works. What do you wish your work to do in those larger context? Or is that something you think about at all?

TL: The problem, if you could call it that, I have is not finding my creativity, it is harnessing it, directing it, and channelling it. I feel as if I have many more ideas than I have time to realize them. Therefore, it is part of my practice to find clarity and then direct my efforts towards a clear-eyed solution. Otherwise I could just bounce around endlessly. That all said, because I have a challenge in finding my focus (which must be part of my nature), I do allow myself several theoretical systems or threads to develop during one period of time. Because I am suspicious of my work for some period of time after I make it and I generally have several works in process/development at one time, this allows me time to consider different perspectives.

This brings up something I feel is important. Immanuel Kant developed the theory of Pluralism in his seminal text *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which basically meant that there were multiple modalities of perception. Pluralism was a new way to describe and understand the world; we were allowed to consider the multiple aspects influencing perception that take place, often at once, or as states of conditionality. Pluralism and theories of epistemological relativity (the basic theory that there is only one absolute truth or validity) form an important aspect of my philosophical working position. If there are multiple ways to understand (and see) an issue, and our understanding of the topic is based on our position relative to the problem, it follows that it is important to fully “circumambulate” the matter at hand to fully understand it. This allows me to have multiple genre threads all at once, so long as they all involved in resolving one central meta point.

The work I make is intended to question some of the basic constructs and beliefs of Minimalism as well as High Art practice generally. The work I create is not intended to be merely self-referential; it points to other aesthetic and social issues as well. If I felt my work was only self-referential and didn't hold the possibility of illuminating other humanistic topics I wouldn't do it. We live in an important and pivotable period of time. Making work which would merely be pleasing and decorative would be the worst! Art can be a kind of medicine for culture and society.

HH: I agree that coming to contact with the essence of a work is a lot like channeling to a larger reality—or something—than finding a creative machine enclosed in our mind. I find the process to be one of the most essential acts to stay human. I always think that a lack of this deep observation process to connect to this mystic ground can lead to dehumanized aspects of our lives today.

I find it interesting that you are describing having multiple pieces going in your studio as examining different perspectives. Are you always conscious about the central theme of the group? I work on many pieces at once also but I always thought that's because it helps me to be more objective about the pieces—which I am sure you are aware of. But looking back what I've done, your description applies to some of my making process as well. By the way, I hope the readers are as intrigued about your answers as I am.

TL: Let me shift gears for a second. I really admire your work! There are qualities which seem closely related to what I am interested in pursuing. The forms and surfaces of the work are absolutely delicious. There is a sensuousness to it which both allude and misdirect simultaneously. They are very subversive! As much as the work inhabits the world of the senses, it is equally intellectually rigorous. There are hints of Tadao Ando, Constantin Brancusi, Le Corbusier, Brutalist architecture all while resting softly on something which is quite other-worldly. The work contains all kinds of humanness with suggestions of something much more grand, in fact spiritual. The sublime is put forward for consideration in your work.

Let me answer your question regarding my awareness of any central themes in my work. You know how it goes; we develop belief systems which define who we are; they become the lens through which we see our choices, and therefore, define what we do. While I am continually redefining my sense of self and what I believe to some extent, I don't actively think about philosophy daily. I live both a structured life and one which allows a fair bit of freedom of my time. Sometimes when I go into the studio I know exactly what needs to be done and other times are much more experimental. (I am in the latter mode right now.) I value the results of my time in the studio, and I value the process of working every bit as much. I spend considerably more time engaged with the working aspects of my practice than living with the results (I wish I could say I collect my work, but the simple truth is I cannot afford my work!). My life with the work after completion is generally limited while the process is continual. Because the process is always happening, my ways of working are always developing.

HH: Did I make you talk too much about the indescribable field of the making process? I get frustrated when people do that. Ha ha ha. There are areas where words just fail...at least my words. And I often try not to define things too much in those places in order not to limit anything in the pool of possibilities. And quite often, the essential parts are not even visible to our conscious mind at that stage. They are buried in the obvious impressions...

And thank you for your beautiful descriptions about my work. I feel that one thing we make sure in the making process is that the work actually engages the viewers at the deeper levels. We actually want to move the viewers at the cores of their beings as opposed to just laying down instructions of how the viewers should be reacting or why. And I believe the delicate making process we discussed above is extremely important in what we are trying to do.

Could you talk a little bit about your latest works?

TL: I have included two working exhibition statements. The first formulates my thoughts regarding two dividing phenomenological aspects of perception. Most of the phenomenological artwork you encounter in the art world is pristinely made, where craft sort of disappears because it is so perfect. However, there is another kind of phenomenal aesthetic as well. It is not built on the premise of craftsmanship disappearing. It is much more crude. In either case, perception is central to what is seen; and what is seen is based on a kind of visual trickery. In either case, it is necessary to see beyond what is actually seen. That is the trick involved in both aesthetics. If there is trickery involved in making a work of art, it lays in the architecture (both physical object and the theory with which it is made) of the work. The trick is how it is perceived and how the underlying architecture (both its physical presence and the ideas which make it) is understood.

There are two opposites which divide phenomenological perception; one is the pristine and the other is the rickety. These differences point toward something bigger; the differences between something clean and something rickety is really what defines the difference between something spiritual and the supernatural. In this definition, the spiritual is the realm of god, where nature is pure while the supernatural is the domain of magic, the artifice where perception is based on illusion. The clean is spiritual; the dirty is supernatural; the light is spiritual, the dark is supernatural; the rich is spiritual; the poor is supernatural. At this point, the logic begins to fray. There is heavy coding and semiotics in all of these distinctions between the spiritual and the supernatural. My work draws on the idiom of minimalism, with all of its possible connotations, yet heavily draws on the architecture of the supernatural, where craft is drawn into question, resolutions seem uncertain, and visual perception as well as value

judgements (good taste versus bad taste or high brow versus low brow aesthetics) are questioned.

The second involves my interests in the connections between drawing and painting (sculpture too!) and the objectness of these concerns.

Acclaimed Naturalist and author Peter Matthiessen makes the statement, "it is the responsibility of the writer to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves." It is a true enough statement and holds tangency to other forms of communication: in this case, visual art. Therefore, it could be said that it is the responsibility of the conceptual artist to visually show the semiotics of art with all of its associated meaning-making images (analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication) and the minimal artist to distill form and create a literal, objective approach to the subject. While I don't consider my work to fit neatly into any particular category, I do feel deep affiliations to both conceptual and minimal principles. As a contemporary artist, it is my responsibility to re-evaluate historic art movements and their contexts.



Ted Larsen, *Here & There*, 2013.
Welded and salvaged steel.

While working primarily with alternative and salvage materials, I am creating work which signifies the connection between drawing and painting. In some of these works I used my old drawing table in conjunction with colorful salvage steel. Because I have a heavy drawing hand, I chose to show that hand metaphorically. I used a router which allowed me to create deep recessed lines which I then inset with salvage steel. The subsequent geometric patterns refer to drawn images. In others works I used pre-painted materials over the top of physically dimensional structures to create perceptual links between drawing and specific conceptual theories behind drawing, namely that drawing can infer the idea of space.

In a series of shaped painting-like structures I overlaid brightly colored materials to draw out the historical references within both the Conceptual and Minimal High Art practices. The titles of the work often allude to their meanings as well as offer insight into their material natures. These works blend both my mark-making with mass produced, now-salvage materials in which I had no hand in making, but considerable effort in altering. All of the work is made to question the basic underlying principles of what constitutes drawing or painting and the value we place on how these practices are historically described.

Art is alive and can critically reflect the moment in which it is created. Artists often attempt to make judgements about historical artworks and the movements which effected them. Challenging established meanings is different from changing these meanings. We are in the midst of a total re-evaluation of our entire society, from our aesthetics to our politics, our distribution of wealth to our natural environment. Likewise, this body of work offers its own re-evaluation and re-contextualization of Minimalism and Conceptualism and offers new outcomes to old solutions.

The reason I am including these in my response to your question is to illustrate my interest in establishing working paradigms, limits, parameters to what I am developing in the studio. Sometimes these are written before I begin work, often during the work, and at other times towards the end of a new body of work. I almost never write at the end of a project. Most of the writing involves quick notes while working which later get modified into these kind of statements. I like taking notes and keeping track of my thinking.

I have not written anything yet for the beginning of this new project. I have several threads I am considering. One involves patterned relationships to other patterns; think of pattern on pattern on pattern and you will get the general idea. One is based on component parts in association to other component parts; think of looking into the engine bay of your car and how all of the components are assembled in relation to each other. While both threads have a certain kind of connection to each other (formal or functional relationships), they are very different visually. They also resolve physically in quite divergent manners. In this way working, one of these routes will show itself more clearly to me and I will follow that path. As of yet, I don't know. I kind of like not knowing.

The final thing I would like to respond to is about the issue around control. As I said earlier, I have no idea what the viewer brings to seeing and therefore I can't predict, solicit, or guarantee any particular outcome whatsoever. I'm not a magician! In fact, it really is none of my business what they experience from my work. I'm sure that sounds strange, but it's the truth for me. Don't get me wrong, I "need" people to resonate strongly with the work; that's how I pay my mortgage, send my kids to school, and eat! However, if my endeavor is to get people to resonate with the work, that feels salacious and not truthful to the work for me. So I try to leave that out of the creative process.

HH: Oh, yes, certainly. You don't want to be manipulated by other people's perceptions in the process. Although, I have found that sometimes people can shift artists' perspectives in looking at the work, helping them to gain understanding of the essence. And as you indicated, there is certainly an aspect to "speak for those who cannot speak for themselves". But the process, I believe, is ultimately rooted in our own perception and the practice of gaining access to the deeper reality. It is not a straight forward process and I feel that you strive and struggle to make your own path with passion and honesty.

And I very much agree that we have a great need to reevaluate the values and norms today. And the fact that the quality, which usually is associated with words like rickety, dirty and poor, becomes a part of the building blocks of the solid presence in your work does make me wonder about some aspects of the minimalism or high art, which are often expressed as flawless, as if they are the logical conclusions proven to be sound and correct, but ONLY as long as we are sticking within the norms and values of the accepted standards. There is something limiting and authoritative about the realm of the high art and that can easily be translated into the issues we face today in the real world. I think those are very thought provoking statements.

Thank you so much for taking time in answering my questions, Ted. I have a lot to digest.

I have one last question. Could you name some artists you are interested in today?

TL: Allison Miller, Joseph Ferriso, Joe Fyfe, Chris Johanson, Colby Bird, Alexander Goilizki, Carroll Dunham, Katherine Bernhardt, Matt Connors, Daniel Cummings, Tony Feher, Fergus Feehily, Sergej Jensen, Jonas Wood, Chuck Webster, Jered Sprecher, Anne Seidman, Stanley Whitney, Mary Heilmann, Thomas Nozkowski, Mark Grotjahn, Richard Tuttle, Andrew Masullo, and the late great Paul Klee just to name a few. But there are many other artists whose work I admire and think have contributed significantly to today's aesthetic dialogue.

Interesting that most of the people I mentioned are primarily known for their paintings. While dimensional space interests me intensely, it is really painting which informs me most. That said, the other day I was reading a lovely transcribed passage by Phyllida Barlow where she talked about how sculpture vanishes. Her take on it was quite fascinating. When you circumambulate a sculpture, the view you see from one perspective is gone when you arrive at another position. She noted how different this quality is from painting, where no matter where you stand, it appears the same. I liked that a lot. I am going to have to consider her words carefully.

Thank you Hiroyuki for this conversation. It was quite enjoyable.

HH: Wow, what a list. Thank YOU, Ted. I feel that I need to come back to you someday and continue our conversation...