

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



39 & # 40 / Toshi Miki & Mike Edge, visual artists, Monroe, Connecticut

They are the most private couple I have ever met. I have known them since 2000, I have visited their home and studios often, they came to visit Ans and me, we had dinners together, and Mike helped us build our Abiquiu home—in fact, it was his outstanding craftsmanship that raised the simple design and construction to a unique level and a joy to us and anyone who looked at its interior details. Yet, after all these years I still do not know much about Mike Edge and Toshi Miki. They are of a kind who only tell you that they've had, say, radiation long *after the fact* and without inviting you to start an excited or anxious discussion about the illness's or treatment's details. "Everything is fine, yes." Anytime one detects that either Mike or Toshi looks a little under the weather and asks how things are going, the answer will be: "Oh, fine, yes." Smile.

I know that Toshi was born in Tokyo and lived in New York City, where she had a daughter. Later she met Mike whom she married; they have been a couple—more than that, a *union* stronger than the United States—ever since. I know even less about Mike, not where in the U.S. he was born, nor what his career was before we first met. I do know he came with a truckload of the highest quality of woodworking tools, and I think one day I heard him humbly whisper he had been a one-of-a-kind furniture maker before he became a full time artist like Toshi. Not that Mike hadn't created art himself in that former life. And no, they had not shown their work to many people. They had a place in upstate New York for a while or for a long time—I don't know. Until they moved to New Mexico.

I first met Mike and Toshi on a Saturday afternoon after I had received their phone call. They asked me if I could help find them a house for (long-term) rent, to stay in while they were buying property in Abiquiu and building their future home. I found them their rental, a small cabin on top of a mesa above Plaza Blanca. Six months later, they'd built a small adobe guest house and I'd witnessed for the first time the quality of Mike's, and Toshi's, handicraft. They did most of the work themselves and that included building the windows, doors, kitchen cabinets and splendid Japanese-style square, wood bathtub (which, oh what magic, didn't leak). The place became an amazing casita.

After they built the casita close to the site where Georgia O'Keeffe became a legend, they built more dwellings. "Mike constructed a wood frame studio/workshop to tackle an even bigger job. Their final home, including a dreamy studio for Toshi, was made with the tried and tested straw bale technique that keeps out heat and cold. The whole site reflects the grandeur of the desert. Mud walls, naked wood and meticulously crafted furniture create a sense of esthetics that borders austerity. Western minimalism meets Japanese finesse. Space is all around. Both artists retreat to their own territory to explore their own path, but at the end of the day they meet again in the center." Again, Mike built all the doors, all the windows, all the kitchen and studio cabinets, a lot of magnificent furniture as well as a large wood bathtub. Toshi, very petit, did the mud walls—she hauled bucket after bucket of mud from the nearby arroyo and covered the walls, which after drying became sensationally beautiful backgrounds for just a few pieces of art.

During all building processes, Toshi was effortlessly it seemed creating hundreds of drawings and models for sculptures—the floors of the existing spaces were covered by them; and Mike, he first helped us finish our home in the Barranca area and then helped our friends Madeline and Birgitte build their very contemporary prefab home on the Chama River. In between these jobs, he too created paintings and drawings. Their studio walls disappeared from sight and the floors soon were hidden beneath scores of paintings and hundreds of sketches and drawings and sculptures. Mike as always was thoughtfully planning his creations. Toshi, astonishingly productive, was led rather by her intuition and senses—not that she didn't carefully explore the fields of her 'themes'.

Everything these two did resulted in perfection. However much they did, they were never in a hurry, they never appeared to be under pressure. I could knock on their door whenever I wanted—and Toshi would say "Lunch, yes?" and she wouldn't have listened to me if I'd said no, which I, no dummy, never did—and she would smoothly slide into the sushi rolling mode and create all kinds of other Japanese delicacies. I missed Mike and Toshi and their cuisine terribly after moving to Kansas. Luckily they accepted my invitation to come and have a joint exhibition in The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs. Recently, I learned they were moving back to the East Coast for health reasons and to be near Toshi's daughter Koko and the grandchildren. They bought a farm with many barns for studios and art storage. I hate to know their magnificent property in Abiquiu is sitting empty.

Their show in Matfield Green was a great experience. I had asked my Dutch friend Hendrik van Leeuwen, whom I had introduced to Mike and Toshi earlier and who immediately became a respectful fan of their work just like me, to curate their exhibition titled 'Separate Ways Together' and write the text from which I am quoting. Hendrik is an art critic and teacher, so he knows what he is saying.

“No matter how stressful other obligations are, Toshi will find an opportunity to wander off to her studio and start making gestures on paper and canvas. It’s a daily ritual, just as habitual as cleaning the body and preparing food. Her hand starts dancing as soon as it grabs a pencil and finds a scrap of paper. There is hardly a notion of beginning or ending to it, only a deeply rooted urge for continuity. Do not think that her swirling lines can be read as a diary. She refrains from signs, images, ideas and emotions that are stocked and labeled by the millions in our memory. What Toshi practices is a form of endless improvisation in a very abstract way. ‘Making art is getting rid of daily noise,’ she says. ‘I want to be free. The trick is to become empty’.”

“Over forty years of experience have made her an expert dancer. Sitting straight and alert her hand dances like a leaf in the wind, leaving behind airy traces. Pencils, markers and brushes, sometimes only a piece of cloth drenched in Japanese ink, touch ground like footprints in the snow and she instantly knows what it’s worth. Quality is not something to reason about. Toshi is very honest and straight-forward in her likes and dislikes about food, health, art and people, without becoming judgmental. Why bother with fleeting incidents when the ultimate goal is to achieve an empty mind? It would be a mistake to relate her work to celebrated artists like Pollock and Twombly. Although she knows and respects the highlights of western art history, Toshi Miki was raised in the east ... her work roots in the Japanese Sumi-e technique with its instantaneous brushwork. Nevertheless, she is an American artist. She arrived young in New York and transformed like every immigrant. She raised Koko the American way and committed herself to Mike Edge, a respectable artist in his own field. In forty years, their marriage has become a unique dialogue between two opposite souls. Despite all differences they maintain a perfect balance in life and work.” Their mutual presentation at Pioneer Bluffs was solid proof of this.



“Michael Edge, who was educated on the East Coast, could easily be labeled as a constructivist, but his designs are far too intuitive for that. True, he often uses a ruler. He likes the clean cut form, the spotless color field, the fine-tuned balance of a well-considered composition. His hand doesn’t dance as inimitable

as Toshi's, but does that make him the opposite artist? Look closer at his work and observe how subtle and sensitive he operates. Do you notice the 'invisible cut' that defines a recent series of paintings? Ponder that idea for a few minutes. When put in a bigger perspective, a world of emotions presents itself: cutting is painful, but the surgeon's scalpel works miracles. Not every cut in life is obvious. When healed, what is left?"

Let's make it clear, wrote Hendrik, that Michael Edge is not a conceptual artist merely with ideas. He simply loves to play with metal, wood, ink or paint. In spite of the precision in the execution his work is never "engineered." He seeks the "unseen" form and what he uncovers with utmost care is never heavy. Metal frames, cutting airy spaces in the sky. Painted sticks that dwindle on a canvas like the game of 'Mikado' – move one stick out and everything shifts. "Deep down I sense a longing to escape the known dimensions," wrote Hendrik. "His works on canvas can be seen as flat abstracts, but they hint ever so subtly to multiple layers and for the careful observer they become sculptural. At the other hand his metal sculptures have a tendency to flatness. They do not impress by volume and mass. They seek to blend in with the landscape and to match its limitless dimensions: the never-ending sky, the unstoppable weeds. Michael Edge is a soft-spoken but courageous sculptor. In all modesty he shows us how to break through the limits of our perception."

Life and work cannot be separated. The landscape invades the minds of both artists. But comparing the two players in one show, wrote Hendrik, made us realize how free a human being can be when he, or she, is able to create an empty mind.

Ton Haak, September 2014—with Hendrik van Leeuwen, October 2011

Photos: Hendrik van Leeuwen