

Sample from *Refractions* / ISBN 9781600063015

Copyright © 2009 NavPress Publishing.

All rights reserved. To order copies of this resource, come back to www.navpress.com.

M A K O T O F U J I M U R A

refractions

a journey of faith, art, and culture

NAVPRESS 



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

**For a free catalog go to www.NavPress.com
or call 1.800.366.7788 in the United States or 1.800.839.4769 in Canada.**

© 2009 by Makoto Fujimura

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from NavPress, P.O. Box 35001, Colorado Springs, CO 80935. www.navpress.com

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-301-5

Cover design by The DesignWorks Group, Charles Brock, www.thedesignworksgroup.com

Cover illustrations: *Still Point – Evening*, 2003; *Goldenfire*, 2006; *The Still Point-Love*; *Splendor Vision*; *Countenance Azurite E*

Author photo by Brad Guice

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Portions of *Refractions* have appeared in *Prism* (found at esa-online.org) and *World* magazines as regular columns.

“Come and See: Leonardo da Vinci’s Philip in *The Last Supper*” was published in *Books and Culture* (November/December 2006, Vol. 12, No. 6, page 10).

“Planting Seedlings in Stone: Art in New York City” was published in *Comment* magazine, December 2, 2005.

“Fallen Towers and the Art of Tea” was published in *Image Journal*, no. 32 (Fall 2001).

All Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® (NIV®). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Fujimura, Makoto, 1960-

Refractions : a journey of art, faith, and culture / Makoto Fujimura.

-- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60006-301-5

1. Fujimura, Makoto, 1960---Ethics. 2. Fujimura, Makoto, 1960---Religion. 3. Art and religion. I. Title.

ND237.F79A35 2008

759.13--dc22

2008030510

Printed in Canada

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 12 11 10 09

Contents

Foreword by Tim Keller	7
Introduction	9
I. A Second Wind	15
II. Splendor	19
III. Bert's Disappearing Weather Maps	25
IV. A Parable of Roots (Beijing Journal)	31
V. The Disintegration Loops: September 11th Issue	37
VI. Fallen Towers and the Art of Tea	43
VII. Nagasaki Koi Voting Booth	59
VIII. "L.I.B.E.S.K.I.N.D."	65
IX. A Beer Toast at Sato Museum, Tokyo	73
X. Dances for Life	79
XI. Surfacing Dolphins	85

XII. A Visual River of Gold	91
XIII. Finding Neverland	95
XIV. Cloud Skin	99
XV. Gretchen's Butterflies	103
XVI. Why Art?	109
XVII. Optimal Foraging Theory: Can You Have Your Birds and Eat Them Too?	115
XVIII. Planting Seedlings in Stone: Art in New York City	121
XIX. Walking Backward into the Future	129
XX. The Housewife That Could	135
XXI. Fra Angelico and the Five-Hundred-Year Question	141
XXII. Come and See: Leonardo da Vinci's Philip in <i>The Last Supper</i>	147
XXIII. Operation Homecoming: Epistles of Injury	159
Postscript	167
Notes	169

Foreword

The movie *Joyeux Noelle* (2005) is the true story of the famous “Christmas Truce” of 1914. It depicts how, during the hostilities of World War I, the French, Scottish, and German troops spontaneously laid down their weapons, came up out of their trenches, and fraternized during an informal, unauthorized armistice. And at the heart of this astonishing grassroots effort at peacemaking was art.

Kaiser Wilhelm II had sent thousands of Christmas trees to the front lines in order to boost the morale of the German troops. After the trees were set up over their trenches, in sight of the enemies’ lines, a German soldier who was a tenor began to sing the Christmas hymn “Stille Nacht” (“Silent Night”). Soon the French and Scottish troops began singing along in their own languages. Finally, soldiers climbed out of their trenches without their weapons and began to talk, then exchanged gifts, and finally even engaged in games of soccer. (The full, true story is told by Stanley Weintraub in *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (Plume, 2002).

The movie adds a fictional character to the true story in the form of a world-class soprano to go with the great tenor. The beauty of their singing breaks through the

political dividing walls and unites the opponents in joy and tears. I've seen something of this unifying power even in my own church services. Because I minister in New York City, our congregation contains some of the best musicians in the world. The music in our services is always excellent, but occasionally we have a musical offering that is so superb and affecting that everyone listening is stunned into silence and moved to tears. And guess what? It is not members rather than visitors, or Christians rather than non-Christians, who are touched. Everyone is brought together; everyone is included. Interestingly, this happens only when the art is skillful and well-done. When the music is mediocre or bad, my members may be edified a bit if they know and love the musician personally, but visitors and strangers are bored and excluded by the experience.

Mako Fujimura is absolutely right to focus on the peace-crafting power of art. He quotes Tolstoy, who wrote that art *“should cause violence to be set aside.”* It is our instinct toward freedom, justice, and beauty. This book of reflections explores Tolstoy's thesis with wisdom, humility, and grace.

I have been a friend and cominister in New York City with Mako since 1990. Mako's International Arts Movement has been a pioneering effort to integrate thoughtful faith with the creation of art that moves us toward the world “that ought to be.” I'm delighted to see this book appear and honored to be able to recommend this book to all.

—TIM KELLER
New York City

Introduction

I write by the south window of my loft, three blocks from Ground Zero, New York City. The window overlooks the young sycamore trees planted on the opposite side of the street where one of the plane engines fell like a meteor, almost killing a pedestrian. Like that pedestrian, my family and I were spared from perishing that day, living so close to the site that will be marked as one of the emblems of a horror of the new century. And yet God has called us to call this our home.

God has taught me as an artist and a follower of Christ to live and work for the “prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29) in the ashes of September 11, 2001. Most Saturday mornings between 2003 and 2006, I sat down to reflect, or refract, on issues related to war and peace, but from the vantage point of an artist, a father, and a husband. As I wrote, I was admitting to the confusion, chaos, and deeper wrestling that I saw in my own heart during and after that fateful day.

In 2003 I was appointed by President Bush to the National Council on the Arts,¹ in recognition of my artistic accomplishments and my advocacy efforts via International Arts Movement.² Working with Dana Gioia, the superb poet and visionary head of the National Endowment for the Arts, I realized that we have to

constantly labor to raise awareness for the arts in the United States and to present America via the arts to the rest of the world. I found that I had a particular vantage point from my bicultural upbringing to do so with some objectivity and passion, as well as with empathy of knowing that the world also suffers from trauma of one kind or another. My new responsibility to advocate for the arts in America increased my travel schedule. Thus, I wrote some of my “Saturday morning essays” during my travels, weaving in experiences from my international journeys. I remember trying to complete some of these essays by the frost of the plane window flying over Asia before the piercing deep blue of the night sky lured me to sleep.

Terry Teachout, the drama critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, who later joined the Council, encouraged me to keep writing in the blogosphere, saying, “Very few times in history do we have the opportunity to shape a new medium for communication. The blogosphere is one of those rare opportunities.” My daughter, then thirteen, taught me how to post a blog with images, and I was ready to take on a new medium.

Here, then, are dispatches from various points on my journey of art, faith, and culture, written from the perspective of an artist living in twenty-first-century Ground Zero and wrestling with the issues of humanity. As a visual artist living and working in New York City, I also dwell in the multifaceted reality of the post-modern visual arts world, a multiphrenic world of shock, cynicism, and irony. I write from within that world, from the perspective of someone who loves to engage with and create art but also as a Christian whose central identity is in Christ, the ultimate Artist and Peacemaker.

Why art in a time of war? Jesus stated, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). The Greek word for peacemakers is *eirene-poiios*, which can be interpreted as “peace poets,” suggesting that peace is a thing to be crafted or made. We need to seek ways to be not just “peacekeepers” but to be engaged “peacemakers.” In such a definition, peace (or the Hebrew word *shalom*) is not simply an absence of war but a thriving of our lives, where God uses our creativity as a vehicle to create the world that ought to be. Art, and any creative expression of humanity, mediates in times of conflict and is often inexplicably tied to wars and conflicts.

Art can play a central role in the making of peace. Jim Hall, the legendary guitarist, in receiving the Jazz Masters Award, stated, “Jazz is our great peacemaker.”³ When jazz musicians travel around the world (they are more respected today outside of the U.S. than inside), their music carries a message of collaboration, the freedom of improvisation, and community—really, the fruits of democracy.⁴ Jazz communicates beyond the barriers of politics and ideologies, as music speaks a universal language.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author of *War and Peace*, wrote in *What Is Art?*:

The task of art is enormous. Through the influence of real art, aided by science, guided by religion, that peaceful co-operation of man which is now maintained by external means—by our law-courts, police, charitable institutions, factory inspection, and so forth,—should be obtained by man’s free and joyous activity. Art should cause violence to be set aside.⁵

Art “should cause violence to be set aside” because to Tolstoy, who wrote under totalitarian oppression, art expresses the desire for, and instinct toward, freedom, justice, and beauty. Tolstoy’s argument for this ideal for the arts continues: “The destiny of art in our time is to transmit from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling the truth.”⁶ In other words, the language of the arts translates the universal longing for peace into the tangible *experience* of the desire for peace. The arts provide us with language for mediating the broken relational and cultural divides: the arts can model for us how we need to value each person as created in the image of God.

This context of rehumanization provided via the arts is essential for communication of the good news. Jesus desires to create in us “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7), so that we can communicate the ultimate message of hope found in the gospel, the story of Jesus, who bridged the gap between God and humanity to a cynical, distrustful world. The arts provide a necessary backdrop for such an enduring conversation.

In my studio, I use ground minerals such as malachite and azurite, layering them to create prismatic refractions, or “visual jazz.” Via my art I hope to create a mediated reality of beauty, hope, and reconciled relationships and cultures. As a founding elder of the Village Church,⁷ I have found that mediation of any kind is never black-and-white but prismatic and complex too. In order to find hope, even in the midst of the broken and torn fragments of relationships, in order to begin to journey into the heart of the divide, we must first wrestle with the deeper issues of faith. We must be willing to be broken *ourselves* into prismatic shards by the Master Artist, God, so that Christ’s light can be refracted in us.

Three months prior to September 11, 2001, I wrote the following for a Santa Fe art exhibit called Beauty Without Regret:

Art cannot be divorced from faith, for to do so is to literally close our eyes to that beauty of the dying sun setting all around us. Every beauty also suffers. Death spreads all over our lives and therefore faith must be given to see through the darkness, to see through the beauty of “the valley of the shadow of death.”

Prayers are given, too, in the layers of broken, pulverized pigments. Beauty is in the brokenness, not in what we can conceive as the perfections, not in the “finished” images but in the incomplete gestures. Now, I await for my paintings to reveal themselves. Perhaps I will find myself rising through the ashes, through the beauty of such broken limitations.

Outside my window I see the young sycamores, once covered in the ashes of September 11, now turning to autumn hues casting their golden shadows on those passing by. Those who walk beneath the sycamore trees are of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Similarly, the culture at large is neither “Christian” nor “secular” but fantastically pluralistic, defying conventional categorizations. In each culture we will no doubt find evidences of trauma, like the ashes of Ground Zero, as we all find ourselves building upon our pulverized and fragmented past. We can choose to disengage from such intractable reality, as our hearts will struggle to find rest

in such exilic ground as Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Darfur, Afghanistan, and so on. Or we can accept the splintered condition of culture as a kaleidoscope of common struggles, a reality that only the golden rays of God can restore and recreate via broken humanity. The latter is my starting promise in writing this book. As you journey with me in this refracted light, I pray the Spirit will indeed reveal God's presence in the undiscovered recesses of our creative journeys.

MAKOTO FUJIMURA
New York City, 2008



Columbine paintings being worked on in my New York studio.

I

A Second Wind

For years Dana Gioia served as a vice president of General Foods before leaving business to write full-time. He told me, “I would come home too late and very tired, but each night I made myself sit down at my desk and simply copy the last paragraph of the essay I was working on or the last stanza of a poem. Usually, I got my ‘second wind.’” With this “second wind” he became one of the most prolific and influential American writers of our time. Many of his coworkers and employees did not even know that he wrote poems until he began winning significant poetry awards (leading to his American Book Award in 2001) and his essays began to appear regularly in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

I think of what Dana stated when I too find myself exhausted by my juggling act of trying to make ends meet, raising a family in this wild city. And yet, no matter how tired I am, when I prepare a panel with freshly spread handmade Japanese Kumohada paper and enter into the daily ritual of painting, I rediscover the joy of creating. The process of creating renews my spirit, and I find myself attuned to the details of life rather than being stressed by being overwhelmed. I find myself listening rather than shouting into the void. Creating art opens my heart to see and listen to the world around me, opening a new vista of experience. This is the gift of



the “second wind.” Such a state taps into what I now call eternal timefulness.¹

A timeful experience is given when our minds are allowed to fully respond to the senses, to tap into the eternal reality that God opens for us via creativity. It’s what William Blake, the eighteenth-century poet, meant when he wrote, “To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour.”² In order to “see a world in a grain of sand,” we must pause to pay attention to the details of life, to let our eyes wander into the crevices of the earth below, to observe the shadows as well as the light, to perhaps even see how the light is refracted in the fragmental remains of sands. And such observational skills must be cultivated as a form of discipline, even in the midst of the hectic lives we lead.

I am often asked, “How do you juggle family, ministry, and your art all at the same time?” Many people have a hard time keeping their creative side alive in the busyness of our times. The advice I give is to dedicate a space, even a small desk, for working on nothing other than your art, whatever medium that may be. Guard against other parts of your life invading that dedicated space. Then, I advise them, do what Dana Gioia did: Make yourself sit down in front of that dedicated space. If you are a poet, like him, copy the last stanza you wrote; if you are a visual artist, open the sketchbook and look at what you have done. Most of the time, you will get your “second wind” as well.

Much of the days that I spend in the studio, I am preparing, waiting, and working to get ready to paint. Being a full-time artist means spending more than half of my time earning the right to create. I may be making a business call to a New York gallery or waiting in line at the bank to send funds to a Japanese papermaker. I could be simply stretching cotton canvas onto stretchers to prepare the surface or waiting for the paper to dry. Often, I am simply “showing up” to be in a regular rhythm of *being available* to create, and I may not feel creative at all. But my second wind kicks in to provide surprising moments of creative bursts. I value these moments, allowing me clarity and focus even in the midst of a stressful day.

An artist needs to be attuned to the nuances and subtleties of life in order to create. For me, this means paying attention to the materials I use. I need to know them in the same way that a writer would know, and love, his or her words. Thus, when

I open my jar of azurite to pour coarsely ground minerals into a white porcelain Japanese bowl and ladle in melted hide glue to mix, I begin to attune myself to another reality. The grains of sand being pushed about under my fingers begin to tap into the intuitive, creative core of my existence, but this arena also hungers for the sensual reality of earth underneath my fingers. Each grain of sand must be saturated with glue, which forms a protective surface that will act both as a binder and a form of varnish. So I am squeezing out the air in the process of mixing. But I am also squeezing out the unnecessary concerns of life, the intrusive voices that prevent me from focusing on the inner core. This daily ritual opens my senses to the reality of creativity. And my senses, soon engaged, propel me into a timeful journey again.

The minerals I use are like prisms, and they refract light more than just reflect it. The color spectrum and her subtle hues take a while to get used to, to truly see. The layering of these minerals reveals a mystery hidden beneath the surface reality, a world full of life and enchantment. It is a world not of competition but of complementation. In refracted light, no area is delineated as dark, or black; instead, the surface dances to the waves of light evenly. Refracted colors do not war against one another; they move in and out of our sensory arena, like an aurora extending her tails far into the horizon.

So today I pause and consider the world around me, from the May irises on Greenwich Street near my loft to the homeless man (Larry) around the corner from my studio. My role as an artist is never accomplished by executing a painting. My role begins there, but it extends into the earthy reality of the broken and beautiful world around me. Artist or not, when we begin to pay attention to the intuitive core of our experience and see the mysteries there, we too like Dana, will find our “second wind.”

April 2004