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Interview #14  
**Kumiko S. McKee**  
by Scott Mastro

Kumiko is a Japanese contemporary artist living in Fort Collins who uses classical techniques to create realistic images that are partly abstract. Her paintings exhibit a high level of detail with finely rendered figures and complicated patterns. They are not only beautiful to look at, but contain individualized stories. That is what her website tells us. Scott Mastro interviewed her for ZAF622 to find out a bit more about this artist and what she is up to.

**Scott: Where did you grow up?**

**Kumiko:** I grew up in a mid-sized city close to mountains and a big lake in northeast Japan.

**Scott: What mediums do you work in and with what materials?**

**Kumiko:** I do drawings and ceramics, but painting is my main medium and I mostly paint with oil on masonite. I sometimes use canvas when the piece is in big in size, otherwise I prefer masonite, because it allows me to work on as small of details as I can. Also, I paint using the traditional technique of painting with glazing mediums, which works better when it painted on masonite.

**Scott: Do you have a favorite color? If so, has it changed over time?**

**Kumiko:** My favorite color is green, but I like and use all kinds of color in my painting. Actually, my preference of color in my painting has changed several times...when I was a high school student, purple dominated the whole image at the beginning, then it moved on to use more brown and sepia. My paintings look more colorful and bright color during my college years.

**Scott: Can you briefly tell the Tale of the Genji and what inspired you in it?**

**Kumiko:** The Tale of Genji is a story based on the Court life in the Heian period (794 –1185 AD) in Japan and was written by Murasaki-Shikibu in the 11th century. It is considered to be the oldest novel in the world. In the story, Genji, who is the main character, is the son of the Emperor and he is very popular with women. Therefore, he had many concubines and mistresses beside his wife. However, I am interested in those ladies who are involved in Genji's life as the subjects for my paintings. Each of women has very unique character and inspired me. I try to represent the image of each woman in the story from my inspiration I got when I read the story



with my style of the painting.

**Scott: Who are your favorite artists?**

**Kumiko:** My favorite old masters are Rembrandt and Gustav Klimt. A contemporary artist would be Istvan Sandorfi.

**Scott: What inspires you?**

**Kumiko:** I think Istvan Sandorfi is one of the most genius painters in our generation. I am not impressed by a lot of paintings by contemporary artists. Only a few contemporary realism-based painters bring their "spirit" through to the surface of the image and it makes them stand out from others. I believe "Istvan Sandorfi" is one of the few painters who is accomplished in both skill and the expression of spirit. This expression in his painting is very powerful and inspires me a lot. Gustav Klimt was a genius painter in the early 20th century. He successfully expressed his point of view in his paintings "Philosophy", "Medicine" and "Jurisprudenc" and his technique and composition is amazing. His paintings inspired me very much and influenced my technique of my recent work. When you see my painting titled Maiko, you can see some influence from Gustav Klimt. Maiko is the oldest painting in the Koto series. In this piece, I experimented creating unrealistic space combining two and three-dimensional images. In the image, the faces and hands are rendered volumetrically in three-dimensions using flesh tones while the background and kimono (Japanese traditional dress) is flat with varying patterns. The flatness at the background is contrasting with the three-dimensional figure of the main character and it characterizes paintings as my style. This idea was influenced by Klimt. Earlier in my life, I was most influenced by Rembrandt's paintings and they inspired me. His dramatic and lively presentation of subjects with use of the chiaroscuro technique, which presents dark subjects dramatically lit by a shaft of light, inspired me greatly. Actually, Chiaroscuro was developed by Caravaggio, but Rembrandt's chiaroscuro technique has a softer contrast between light and dark that bring out the feelings of his subject.



**Scott: Where did you study art?**

**Kumiko:** I began studying art as a fine art major at a private high school in Japan where I learned the basic techniques and knowledge of art. My interest in oil painting grew after trying it for the first time when I was sixteen. After I moved to US, I studied art as a fine art major at the University of Wyoming where I learned the creative part of art and how to develop my own style. I graduated in 2002.

**Scott: What is it like being a woman painter, or just a painter, in Japan?**

**Kumiko:** First of all, I feel lucky to be a women artist in the postmodern era because of the acceptance of women artists in the art world, which is now equal to male artists, a trend since postmodernism started. Modernism was still kind of a masculine world that women artist were not equally accepted into. Being a painter in Japan is hard for artist like me. Not as woman painter, but simply as a painter. People in Japan judge an artist by her/his background where she/he has studied and who the teacher was rather than your unique talent. If you graduated from a famous Art University and your teacher was well known in the Japanese art world, then you can be successful as an artist in Japan even if you don't have talent. I have heard about some talented artists who were rejected for the submission for the



annual art competition due to that she/he didn't have enough of a background. However, those artists were became well known in other countries like US or Germany. Also, there is certain popular style and movement in art from time to time and if your art is something deferent from the stream of what is popular, then it is hard to be successful as an artist. This is because people tend not to prefer something unique or different from the popular style going on in the time. My painting style in my Japanese series, especially "The Tale of Genji" series, is likely difficult to be accepted in Japan. Since the theme of my paintings is related to Japanese literature, but my painting style is a mixture of Western and Japanese traditional techniques, it would be unacceptable in the Japanese art world. There would be an expectation for a painting that has a theme of "The Tale of Genji" that it should be painted by following the traditional school style such as "Tosa school style", "Sumiyoshi school style" or something similar. I know people want to preserve the traditions, but my question is why I have to paint them with a traditional style that an old Japanese master has done already done in the past. I wanted to paint them with a new style, which looks more contemporary. The point is that to be successful as an artist in Japan, uniqueness and talent is not so important. Rather the background and whether it is in the stream of popularity is very important.

**Scott: In the US?**

**Kumiko:** Being an artist in the U.S. is very different from Japan through my experience. The priority in art in the U.S. is uniqueness and creativity rather than following the rules of the old masters. Compare to Japan, artists in the U.S. are trying to find something that makes them stand out from others. Artists are freely expressing themselves in their art and have their own individual style. At the same time, the art world in the U.S. is very open and supportive to those creative artists who have their own personal style and uniqueness in their artwork. Being an artist in the U.S. is easier than in Japan and comfortable for me.

**Scott: Goals?**

**Kumiko:** My challenge in the "KOTO" series is to show the beautiful elements of Japanese culture with the images in a way that people from other cultures can appreciate and make a connection with. I hope my artwork will help people in the world to better understand and bring interest to the Japanese culture as well as the diversity and depth of Asian-Pacific culture.

**Scott: What are you currently working on?**

**Kumiko:** Currently, I'm working on a political-based series of paintings called "Power on the Earth" that expresses my point of view on the current war. Three paintings were completed in 2005 and 2006 and I'm working on another additional two paintings for an upcoming show. Actually, I have collaborated with two other artists—one from New York and one from Fort Collins—to create a three-artist show called "In This Life". This exhibition features three artists with different backgrounds and speaks about the current situation of the war in Iraq.

Kumiko's work can be seen on her web site:  
[www.kumiko-art.com](http://www.kumiko-art.com)

**Scott: Who are new artists we should be watching?**

**Kumiko:** Felipe Echevarria is one of the collaborating artists for our upcoming three-artist show "In This Life". He is a Fort Collins-based artist. <http://www.felipe.tv> Miguel Tio is the third artist to participate in our upcoming show, who is based on New York.



<http://www.migueltio.com/>

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