



"Koi Fish Love" Watercolor by Niya Christine

Creative Space Design - Part 1

Conditions for Genius. Health and lifestyle.

by Niya Christine

I was luxuriating in Carmel one weekend many years back. The smell of the ocean in the late morning heat — people bustling about in a coffee charged, dogs in tow, and art going fashion—piling into galleries. Something came

over me that day that I will never forget. A raw seize of pure artist to artist love that caused some pretty risky behavior.

As I walked into a gallery, a large painting of Koi literally made me stop breathing. It was a watercolor. The layers of color were pure genius. I contacted the artist with a handwritten letter. I begged him to apprentice me. I was ready to give up whatever was necessary to paint like him.

Three weeks later, a Japanese man 80 to my 18 years of age picked me up in a tiny town in Northern Ca. and took me to his ½ built house in the mountains south of Oregon. I was to spend a week with him, paint with him in the studio, learn everything I could about creative practice to be just like him. This was my thinking at the time. Simple, clear and rudimentary right? Wrong.

He made 4k per month on his Koi paintings in galleries in the U.S and Asia. He was building his home slowly due to his age and income. I slept in a room without walls. He woke me up every morning at 5 a.m. to yogurt and green tea on the table. He then insisted we walk 5 miles. While we walked he talked about his family, particularly his wife and her health during child-bearing years. I was anxious to get back to the studio to paint with him and decided he

was a lonely man in need of a listener. I obliged happily the first couple days. But by day 3, my legs were sore, I was hungry all the time. The miso soup, yogurt, green tea and almonds just weren't doing the trick. The 5 mile walks were followed by more yogurt and tales of his childhood and then a 3 hour nap. In the afternoons he talked on the phone, ignoring me much of the time. I pined to see his studio and more of his work. By day 4, I lost hope of painting with him, but his stories were getting better and better. I thought about sneaking into the studio late at night, but the man never slept. He was up pattering around most nights.

On Friday, we were to leave at 2 p.m. to take me home. To my amazing delight, after our usual breakfast of bones and dirt (or so it felt after 5 days), he asked if I would like to paint with him instead of our usual 5 mile walk. I had to contain the spurt of air and almonds that wanted to erupt in happiness. This is what I had wanted since the day I saw his magnificent painting in Carmel.

In the studio, he moved in short curt deliberation. He set me up on one side of the studio with a large piece of hot press watercolor paper, a cup of water and a small travel sized watercolor set. He then worked in silence on his own piece. The studio was cold inside, and gray. I only felt

inspired to impress him. I was 18 and shaking in my boots to prove myself to the world.

I painted nervously for 20 minutes.

"How's this?"

He ignored me and continued to do his work. I meandered over to watch him work. He was calm. He worked like a dream in motion. Nothing could disturb the world he lived in and created. He began to speak to me very slowly:

"Americans think they are born with genius; that is somehow belongs to them—to their DNA. Genius is not that. It's a condition you create. It's 5 mile early morning walks, eating nutritious food for a strong body and mind. It's taking care of your power as a woman to create a child. You take care of your body to create; and you takes care of your mind to make brilliant paintings. You take naps, you respect the body, you respect creation."

He never did look at my painting. And I got a postcard from him once a year for 5 years until he died. He encouraged me. He said once that he sensed I had the stuff to be a great painter and that I should always keep a keen eye on balance.

I still have that postcard in a box of cherished writings. I think of him when I swim, when I eat yogurt for breakfast,

when I clean the studio in preparation for a focused hour of color immersion. I think of him when I don't want to cheat myself of anything in that that one hour. His life was one long prayer of creation. His relationships, his art and his health. He nurtured a body that was strong enough to build a house on his own at age 80. And a heart willing to shepherd an insecure 18 year old into an influence that lives on in my life today.

I wanted to share this story for anyone who feels frustrated with not being able to just pop into their creations and be “on” immediately. I agree with my Japanese mentor; the cultivation of the full artist is the full person. The creative space in this case is our bodies and the lifestyle we nurture. It culls all aspects of our life and well being to bear. His respect and wisdom continues to teach me today.



This painting is a Koi fish painting I created in November 2013. It doesn't compare with the artistry of my Japanese mentor. I'm still working at it.