

THE ART OF IMPERFECTION

Hard to explain and even harder to practice, *Glass Man* discovers how Japan's ancient "wabi sabi" way of life is influencing art and fashion

The year 2021 marks the tenth anniversary of Marie Kondo's *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* – a simple but effective guidebook based on the Japanese Shinto religion. After a year at home endlessly tidying, it was only natural that we would turn to yet another Japanese teaching, this time via Buddhism. Buddhists believe language is an insufficient tool for understanding, hence the difficulty in translation – the closest we can get is "wabi", meaning living in nature/to be happy away from society, and "sabi", meaning weathered in a rustic and elegant fashion. Wabi sabi is an



Jacket, SS21 Casely-Hayford
Image courtesy of Nate Casely-Hayford

integral element of the Japanese way of life and yet it seems at direct odds with Western values.

Westerners relentlessly strive for an ideal of perfection, while Buddhists honour imperfection and emptiness, so much so that understanding these two principles is one of the first stages to enlightenment or "satori". Buddhist existence centres upon three fundamentals – impermanence, suffering and absence of self – three ideas the world over were forced to swallow as a result of Covid-19.

So how has contemporary culture absorbed the wabi sabi way of thinking? Perhaps more sabi than wabi, Charlie Casely-Hayford at British modern tailoring brand, Casely-Hayford, has always found "beauty in the imperfection" both in his own collection and in his recent collaboration with Fred Perry – a classic stripe on a jacket on closer inspection has actually been hand frayed in their Japanese atelier. At Casely-Hayford/Fred Perry you'll find a white knit spattered with distressed holes, and polo shirts baring odd buttons, giving the impression of an item that has been passed down through the generations. Indeed, Charlie knows a thing or two about legacy, having inherited design wisdom from his father, the late Joe Casely-Hayford OBE. Charlie Casely-Hayford's designs hark back to the modest and simple pillars of wabi sabi: "The clothing feels like human hands crafting it", the direct opposite to today's fast fashion culture.

Handmade garments are extremely important for Charlie Casely-Hayford "because I feel like if you can imbue a sense of memory into the garment" then the value of the garment, and the appreciation for it, rises dramatically.



Trousers, SS17 Casely-Hayford
Image courtesy of Nate Casely-Hayford



Constance Read, Sea Fire
Image courtesy of Constance Read



Supper Ceramics
Image courtesy of Shenyue Ding



Supper Ceramics
Image courtesy of Shenyue Ding

Casely-Hayford's consciousness surrounding the power of clothing increased even more after the pandemic: "I guess everyone in their own type of way is seeking out something more authentic on the other side of this lockdown and seeking transparency or sustainability." Consumers are reacting against the tick-box trends of commercialism, craving one-off pieces, whether that be found on rental platforms like ByRotation or the Hurr collective, or via vintage – look to Selfridges Project Earth, Conscious at Browns or LA's The Real Real for proof that new no longer means best. If anything, the older or the more reincarnations an item of clothing has had, the higher value it retains.

If you're wearing ELV (East London Vintage) denim, you're simultaneously wearing several people's precious memories. Having worked as a stylist and editor for years, Anna Foster saw right through the fashion industry and was no longer enamoured by its voracious output. To help combat this, she created a low carbon footprint denim brand with a zero-waste policy: "Sustainability is the ultimate part of what I do. We live in a very aesthetic world, so a successful brand has to marry carefully the two of them together."

All of the denim is sourced from second-hand warehouses across the UK and is given a deep clean, using seven litres of water compared to the 7,000 litres used to create a new pair of jeans (just to put that into perspective, that's more than 13 years' worth of drinking water for a single person).

Foster's dedication to the planet and also the beauty of creating one-off pieces nods to the wabi sabi fundamentals of an appreciation for nature and transience. Each element has had a previous life and continues to metamorphose into another—the labels are hand-printed by Mesha & Blade in east London on 100 per cent recycled board with vegetable ink, the leather patches are cut-offs from Tura London, and any cut-offs from ELV are given to artist Ian Berry or local schools and universities for their textiles courses. Foster understands that a material isn't created for one set of criteria, but to be reimagined and undergo various transformations, spreading joy and beauty in its wake, while also solving and promoting waste management.

The etymology behind wabi sabi is to rust. When gazing at the pottery of Shenyue Ding, star of *The Great Pottery Throw Down* and founder of *Supper Ceramics*, you can't help but think that they have been carved by nature, left out to bask in the sun and whipped by wind. Like Foster and Casely-Hayford, Ding prioritises hand-crafted, one-off pieces: "With handmade ceramics, I feel that beauty comes from uniqueness over mass-produced Ikea uniformity. My work embraces imperfection at all stages, and the colours that I love most are all inspired by nature."

It's not only her palette that is informed by nature but her choice of materials, too: "I am also developing my own selection of glazes, made up from finely ground natural rocks suspended in water that then get fired to 1,300 degrees ... Incorporating part of the earth into my work, and then seeing the glazes transform giving unexpected colours and textures is dazzling to me."

Fellow colour addict, modern artist Constance Read, points out that "most creative people probably turn to nature at some point in their process, whether to get new ideas or maybe to clear their minds of old ones". In line with wabi sabi's absence of self, Read walked religiously along the north Norfolk mudflats throughout lockdown, finding inspiration for her *Mud Series*: "Every time I go down there, there are different shades of colour and different shapes, the sand falling in different ways. Sometimes it looks like this perfect rippled scape, untouched by humans, it's the sand mimicking the sea in perfect harmony. The next day the



Constance Read, Large Gradient
Image courtesy of Constance Read

perfect undulations have disappeared, swallowed by the tide; it could be a completely different beach.

“The sky is almost the opposing colour of crimson compared to the tranquil blue of the day before. But the horizon always stays the same. That’s why I had that hard line running through all my pictures, it shows there is some consistency in the forever changing space.”

Read specialises in silkscreen printing, a process that is normally heralded for its level of perfection. Instead she seeks out the “mistakes and mis-registration for a much more interesting result, and one that could never be predicted, just like the unpredictability of nature itself”. The method of silkscreen printing is a way of formalising Read’s transient artistic themes: “I put them into print almost to solidify them, make them permanent and secure that idea onto paper.”

Security was something we all wrestled with throughout the pandemic. The only constant we could turn to was nature. The rhythms of the seasons, whether you lived in the city or countryside, felt all the more prominent as the sole markers for times passing. Idris Khan portrays this profound relationship with nature in his series *The Seasons Turn*, made up of 28 oil, collage and watercolours at the Victoria Miro gallery. Each piece is layered with Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* score, set amid a palette that also reflects the colours of the season.

At the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, various artists showcase work that is quite literally living in nature, allowing nature to transform

each piece. Scottish-born artist Anya Gallacio’s *Blessed* plays on contemporary consumer culture. She welcomes the unpredictability of nature “and the impermanence of the materials”, just as Barbara Hepworth’s *Square with Two Circles*, also situated within the park. For Gallacio, it is paramount that her work is “allowed to breath outdoors”. Whilst wabi sabi may focus on the importance of the outdoors, we can cherish it indoors too.

Belgian interior designer, Axel Vervoordt, centres his entire practice upon wabi sabi, using natural materials and colours on simple pieces that have been weathered by nature, removing any excess and adding texture. That’s not to say you can buy into wabi sabi, it’s a state of mind, not a trend to tap into.

Age and life’s transience is not a psychological territory we feel comfortable with, yet facing the unthinkable was an undeniably humbling experience throughout lockdown. Richard Powell sums up wabi sabi in his book, *Wabi Sabi Simple: Create Beauty, Value Imperfection, Live Deeply*: “Wabi sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.” After a year of reflection, it seems we have all learnt how to be a bit more wabi sabi.

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