

Art & Medical Treatment: “Feeling Arts” as healing art

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I. What is “Feeling Arts”?

“Feeling Arts” is an art of feeling that I created using a unique technique of casting light on an abstract painting (1.45 x 2.45m) made of clay, India ink, and gold dust in three primary colors: blue, red, and yellow. The variations in the proportion and intensity of the lights produce a subtle shading effect that constantly gives new dimensions to a painting. Soothing sound effects are offered during the presentation. They come from classical music, children’s songs, a free-reed mouth organ in court music, a synthesizer, or a whale’s call.



It has been my constant theme since my days in art school to express my ideas through the combination of clay, India ink, and gold dust. At the beginning, the theme of my work was ‘the Earth,’ which expanded towards ‘universe,’ ‘life,’ and finally the ‘heavenly world.’ When I first thought about portraying the earth, I was struck by the idea of using clay as one of the painting materials. The scent of clay and India ink, their feel to the touch, and their color appealed greatly to me. It took me some time to find the ideal clay for my painting. In my paintings, clay is dissolved and applied on a canvas over which India ink is dashed. This procedure is repeated several times. There is always shade in my work, but light (hope) is never absent. Shade and light exist together to create space. I work on a painting according to the theme, and each painting takes about two to three months to finish.

After graduating from university, I went over to the United States, where I first observed the technique of “*light dessin*,” or using spotlights on paintings to produce visual effects. This technique was originally introduced by the woodprint artist, Mr. Nangi Kato. When I tried the same lighting technique on my

paintings, a dramatic effect was brought about. Because clay, India ink, and gold dust reflect lights in different degrees, the painting suddenly took on a stereographic quality unlike that of any other painting. I knew this was what I had long been looking for. The degree of light of each of the three primary colors, the lighting spots, and the intensity of the lights could be adjusted to produce exquisite changes in the shades and depth of a painting. It was just like the spectacular view of the Grand Canyon, which changes from pink to blue by the minute as the sun sets.

My paintings have always had themes. However, the combination of these themes with the lighting effect and the soothing sound effects produced by classical music, children’s songs, a free-reed mouth organ in court music, a synthesizer, or a whale’s call allows the viewers to build their own images, which go beyond the theme. “Feeling Arts” is realized through collaborative work between the painter and the viewers. Each viewer could possess different viewpoints and feelings towards the same painting, for the finishing touch is always given by the viewers, who use their own imaginary brushes to paint their own images in their minds. It is a kind of free art that doesn’t invite criticism.

II. “Feeling Arts” and its Healing Effects

I was confronted with the meaning of “life” when my own child became seriously ill. At that point, everything else disappeared, and only the brilliance of “life” was around me. That was when my life came into unity with my work. Visiting my child in the hospital, where I happened to meet other patients and their families, I realized that this was the kind of place where “Feeling Arts” was needed.

I believe that inspiration is what promotes vitality in people. Through inspiration from “Feeling Arts”, the patients and their families, all of whom are in pain and suffering, learn to understand and accept themselves the way they are. This brings peace to their minds, thus promoting vitality, which leads to natural healing power.

Healing takes place when you accept yourself the way you are and come to terms with the contradictions inside you, which is exactly what I am trying to express through “Feeling Arts”. Shade and light exist together to create a space. Harmony is achieved not just through beauty alone but through the coexistence of shade and light. Though all kinds of art have a healing power to some degree, “Feeling Arts” is unique because it does not bring with it a strong message or story by its creator but rather lets the viewers use their imagination freely and allows them to reflect their feelings on the painting.

I have held many public exhibitions, especially in places such as health, medical, and welfare institutions as well as temporary housing units built after the Great Hanshin Earthquake. One thing that I have learned from my experience is that those who are in pain and suffering, such as the sick, the handicapped, or their families as well as the victims of a natural disaster, are definitely more susceptible to “Feeling Arts”. This is probably because those who experience pain and suffering tend to have acute sensitivity and are capable of facing their true selves.

III. Reactions from those who experience pain and suffering

Over the past 20 years, viewers’ reactions during art exhibits of my work have never failed to surprise me. These reactions are particularly poignant in the case of people who are in pain and suffering due to being sick or handicapped or having been victims of a natural disaster. I could never fully understand the extent of their emotions, but I was often moved by their reactions and could feel the same peace and hope in my mind, thinking that my viewers might be relieved through “Feeling Arts”. For the sake of brevity, I will present only some of many examples.



● Shortly after I started my public exhibition activities, I visited the cancer ward for the terminally ill to give a presentation on “Feeling Arts”. During the presentation, I was aware of a male patient who slept through the entire presentation. I would be lying if I said that this didn’t bother me. However, after the presentation was over, this man’s wife came to me overwhelmed with feeling and in tears.

She told me that her husband had been informed that he had cancer and was in constant fear of death. He tried to overcome his fear by listening to music, but he could never sleep well at night. On the day of the presentation, he was totally exhausted both physically and mentally. I have no way of knowing what “Feeling Arts” did to him, but I will always remember the peaceful sleeping face of this patient during the presentation and the gratitude expressed by his wife. Ever since then, I have considered sleeping as one way to react to “Feeling Arts”.

● An elderly male patient who had been hospitalized for a long time came to see my presentation with his wife. After the presentation, the patient simply said, ‘Beautiful ...’ and started crying. His wife, watching him, was also overwhelmed and broke into tears. Withholding my own tears, I listened to what she had to say.

‘My husband is suffering from severe constipation almost every day. When he is in pain, I say to him, ‘Let’s walk hand in hand the path that many others might have followed. I will walk with you and share your pain.’ This is how we face reality every day. “Feeling Arts” has given us a glimpse of the universe. Through the endless beauty of spiritual clouds, we felt we could actually ride the spiritual wave that leads us to heaven. We can now lead a peaceful life that we never before imagined possible. Thank you very much.’

I did not really understand what they had been going through, but it was apparent that, through pain and suffering, they had found something important in “Feeling Arts” that they could both share.

● When I gave a presentation at a rehabilitation institution for the handicapped, I received a very touching comment from an adult female patient who had been visiting the institution for rehabilitation in her fight against a disease that caused her muscle functions to deteriorate gradually.

Her writing, which filled a whole page, was all in very shaky, uneven *hiragana*, but it had apparently been written with great care. At the end of her comments, she said, ‘I think I am going to paint something. It doesn’t matter what people say about my technique; all I need is to feel good about my accomplishment.’

On the same sheet for comments, I included a yes-no questionnaire asking the respondent if he or she would like to join the volunteer activities for “Feeling Arts”. With a trembling hand, she had circled ‘yes.’ Her days of daily rehabilitation while slowly losing physical mobility after adulthood are beyond my

imagination. To me, her comments seemed to reflect the depth of emotion with which she pictured “Feeling Arts” in her mind.

● I remember a child whose facial expression as well as physical functions was lost to muscular dystrophy. He started crying while experiencing “Feeling Arts”. Everyone was surprised to see a child with such severe lesions actually shedding tears. Teachers at this special school said, “Emotional reaction is the proof of his very existence.” They were inspired by the fact that “Feeling Arts” had given hope to a child with an incurable disease by today’s medicine.

IV. Total Results of Comments Obtained from Health, Medical, and Welfare Institutions

When I hold public presentations, I ask the viewers to write down whatever impression they have over “Feeling Arts”. I have selected those obtained from patients, the physically handicapped, their families, and the staff at health, medical, and welfare institutions. Considering the descriptions, I have categorized the collected responses into ‘inspiration,’ ‘peace,’ and ‘hope.’ Almost everyone at the health, medical, and welfare institutions where exhibits are held turns in a response.

Table 1 shows the categorized result of collected responses. Of 399 respondents, 210 (52.6%), the largest number of respondents, indicated that ‘peace’ was their impression about “Feeling Arts”, followed by 84 (21.1%) who referred to both ‘peace’ and ‘inspiration.’ Fifty-four people (13.5%) indicated that their impression was one of ‘inspiration,’ while 12 people (3.0%) referred to ‘hope.’ Five people (1.3%) indicated all of the categories: ‘peace,’ ‘inspiration,’ and ‘hope.’ Thirty-four people (8.5%) had negative or other impressions or registered no reaction at all.

The overall result shows that 91.5% of all respondents indicated that their impression was at least one of ‘inspiration,’ ‘peace,’ or ‘hope.’ The fact that 74.9% of respondents included ‘peace’ in their descriptions indicates that “Feeling Arts” does have a healing effect. However, this result is highly associated with the fact that the respondents were chosen from health, medical, or welfare institutions, for whom pain and suffering are directly or indirectly part of their lives.

Table 1. “Feeling Arts” / The Categorized Results of Collected Responses

Contents of Description	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Main impression of ‘peace’	210	52.6%
Impression of both ‘peace’ and ‘inspiration’	84	21.1%
Main impression of ‘inspiration’	54	13.5%
Main impression of ‘hope’	12	3.0%
Impressions of ‘peace,’ ‘inspiration,’ and ‘hope’	5	1.3%
Other impressions	34	8.5%
Total	399	100.0%

(Respondents from health, medical, and welfare institutions)

V. Comments from the Viewers

I have received numerous comments from viewers of “Feeling Arts”. As I have mentioned before, “Feeling Arts” is a collaborative work between the creator and viewers. Therefore, in a way, the comments from viewers are the reflection of the creator’s intention. For the sake of brevity, I have selected only some of the comments received from viewers.

● The artist and the canvas are an incomplete triangle; the audience completes the tripod individually or en masse. As director of the art program at Stanford Hospital, this concept of art is integral in my work with patients, family members, and visitors who enjoy the hospital’s art collection. When I experienced Mr. Kitamura’s “Feeling Arts”, I realized how deeply true this statement is. The canvas, the lights, the sounds provided a unique opportunity for me to transcend everyday stress, pain, worry and to relax completely. Different from guided imagery, “Feeling Arts” invites the viewer to interpret images transformed by light and music. For patients with chronic pain, life threatening illness, or confined to their beds, “Feeling Arts” can be an emotional catharsis. (Amanda Spielman, Ex-director of Arts Program, Stanford Hospital and Clinics, U.S.)

● “Feeling Arts”, with its quiet but powerful message, works deep into the small universe that exists within the mind of each viewer. When I first encountered this richly varied type of art, I was overtaken with admiration and wondered how close art could get to the realm of God. Viewing this type of art was a catharsis for me, a sort of extreme meditative state, and I felt as if I were touching something inexplicably sacred. In the face of the evanescent beauty of the morning or the evening glow, we often experience this sensation of love towards everything that comes into our sight and a desire to embrace ourselves and everything in the world. Through this type of art, I have experienced emotions that almost reach the level of religious feelings. “Feeling Arts” touched the deepest layer of my emotions. (Ayako Ono, Kobe City College of Nursing, Japan)

● Words cannot express Yoshihiro Kitamura’s “Feeling Arts”. The visual world of light and darkness depicted on an abstract painting made of golden color, India ink, and clay brings on human sensations invoked by aural information in the form of music or the sound of nature. Therefore, some may get something out of it, while others may only perceive what the eyes can see. For this reason, it was such a relief for the viewers when Mr. Kitamura said before starting the presentation: ‘It doesn’t matter whether you can see it or not; just follow your heart.’ Viewers could relieve themselves of the pressure to have to understand while watching the presentation. A young woman who kept her eyes closed all through the presentation wrote in her comments that she had reached the stage of nothingness during the presentation and felt in touch with Mother Nature. A youngster who grew sympathetic and kind towards others said to me: ‘I saw a lot of middle-aged men crying. They must have been really healed.’ “Feeling Arts” provides time and space for a person to reflect on his or her own self. “Feeling Arts” is the art to invoke feeling through sound and visual effects. After the presentation, my heart was filled with serenity and peace. I am part of the health relief program in the provincial city of Bangladesh. I wish the underprivileged people there and the local patients with renal diseases who cannot receive treatment due to lack of dialyzers could join us in watching Mr. Kitamura’s “Feeling Arts”. (Harue Kimura, Institute of Medical Science, University of Tokyo, Japan)

● Always rushing for something, we no longer spend time just sitting around in nature. Instead, we try to live in a more efficient and effective way. “Feeling Arts” tells us to slow down and breath in and out. It gives us a rare moment when we do not have to think about doing something and we can surrender ourselves to something that brings us peace, simply rejoicing in the varying colors and patterns. No need to find meanings, no need to find any answers. Just feel the light and shade and let our heart rejoice in it; that is all we have to do. Through “Feeling Arts”, we come in touch with people who have let their lives be at the mercy of some other being. (Hiromi Kuramitsu, Ashiya University, Japan)

● What is it that is lost in modern people like us as we insatiably crave for excitement? It is true that we never get bored, but that does not mean we are satisfied. Mr. Kitamura’s “Feeling Arts” awakens our mind and spirit and restores peace and honesty in us. We are at the mercy of the times, and we simply live and die like a nobody. But that is not what we want. “Feeling Arts” awakens the thinker and the poet in us. It makes us realize how everyone’s life has its own unique rhythm and an irreplaceable quality about it. Hope arises as I intuitively find my *raison d’être* and simultaneously understand the *raison d’être* of art. It is such a rare moment. (Masahiro Hamashita, esthetics major, School of Letters, Kobe College, Japan)

● I had the opportunity to view Mr. Kitamura’s “Feeling Arts” as an objective bystander rather than a viewer. It was then that I understood how this art could heal the mind. One may not always be healed by simply experiencing it. As an art, “Feeling Arts” itself sends out messages to viewers, which, accompanied by various feelings such as of inspiration, peace, and hope, induce each viewer to freely develop his own images. Furthermore, Mr. Kitamura’s way of accepting all kinds of ideas from viewers and sending out minimum messages of his own encourages each viewer to interpret and express his own feelings and thinking. Art knows no frontiers. I am sure this healing method will spread beyond the boundaries of religion, race, and culture. (Takayuki Yoshioka, Department of Health and Behavioral Science, Kobe City College of Nursing, Japan)

VI. Conclusion

Through the public presentations of my works, I have realized the true nature of human beings and discovered that true sensitivity exists in ‘pain and suffering.’ I hope that “Feeling Arts” will lead me to all kinds of people around the world and that, together with them, I will keep on painting to produce ‘inspiration,’ ‘peace of mind,’ and ‘light (hope).’