



TITLE: *Darkening Sky '76*
ARTIST: Kenji Kusaka
DATE: 1976
SIZE: 14 ¾" x 10 ¾"
MEDIUM: color woodblock print
ACCESSION #: 77.1



ADDITIONAL WORKS BY ARTIST IN COLLECTION: YES_ NO X

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"The concept of my work is represented by a kind of the life force. I am searching for my outlook on the universe, particularly by regarding the clarification of colors and speed."
 -Kenji Kusaka

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Kenji Kusaka was born in the countryside of the city of Tsuyama in Okayama Prefecture in 1936. While he was young, he studied printmaking for 5 years under the printmaker Nagare Koji. He moved to Tokyo in 1952 at the age of 24 to continue his artistry in printmaking. In 1966, Kusaka gained prominence with his win of the National Museum of Modern Art Award at the Tokyo Biennale. The abstract or semi-abstract forms in bold colors best characterize Kusaka's work with a focus on perspective and/or gradation. He commonly depicts the form of an egg or clouds in his work. The concept of the horizon is another motif that greatly influences his work, as seen in *Darkening Sky '76*.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION:

Kenji Kusaka's print differs from the usual style of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints. Traditionally, stylistic aspects of *ukiyo-e* prints include harmonious coloring, flexible curving lines, and an emphasis on the dramatic relationship between figures. Kusaka's prints contradict most of these conventional ideals and feature bold primary colors, abstracted lines, and an intense use of perspective and gradation. Kusaka's work is reminiscent of color field paintings by artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Color field paintings featured large plains of bold, flat color on canvases and came after the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s. Kusaka makes references to identifiable shapes and objects, but they become larger, simpler in color, more abstract, and full of movement. He keeps traditional characteristics of *ukiyo-e* prints such as bold colors and techniques like gradation, but he uses a style outside the scope of *ukiyo-e* prints, incorporating a noticeable western influence.

RELATED TERMINOLOGY:

Ukiyo-e: Japanese genre of art consisting of woodblock prints or images from the 17th to 19th centuries; *ukiyo-e* means "pictures of the floating world" in Japanese.

Gradation: Technique used in the creation of *ukiyo-e* prints, the passing of one color to another on the surface of the print.



Work 69.5, featuring the egg motif, by Kenji Kusaka (1969), 32" 5/16 x 20" 11/16.



Vir Heroicus Sublimis, color field painting by Barnett Newman (1950-51), 7' 11" x 17' 9."

Completed by Grace Reynolds, 2017

REFERENCES:

- http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioid=146244
- <http://collection.cmoa.org/CollectionDetail.aspx?item=1026797&retPrompt=Back+to+Results&retUrl=CollectionSearch.aspx%3fsrch%3dNagare%2bKoji>
- <http://www.myjapanesehanga.com/home/artists/kusaka-kenji-b-1936>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/c/colour-field-painting>

CREATING YOUR OWN MOTIF: K-5

Session Activity: In this activity, students will choose their own motifs to be featured in their artwork, much like Kenji Kusaka did with the egg and cloud. Students will learn the process of abstraction and create their own abstracted motifs to include in their work.

Objectives: Through creating their own motifs, students will learn about the process of abstraction.

Materials: crayons or pastels, paper, pencils, markers, paint, paintbrushes, images of Kenji Kusaka's artwork

Activity Procedures: Begin the activity by showing students the artwork of Kenji Kusaka that features his abstracted egg and cloud motifs. Ask the students why they think he chose those motifs in his artwork. Show the students actual pictures of eggs and clouds and compare and contrast them to Kusaka's rendering of those objects, focusing on shapes, colors, and placement within an environment, context or background. Students will then be asked to think of their own motifs and explain the meaning behind them. Students will then each make a work of art that uses their motifs in an abstracted way by changing shapes, colors, and context or background. Students have the option to use crayons, pencils, pens, or paint. After the students create their own artwork with their motifs, they will be asked to discuss their motifs and explain the way they used abstraction.

VOCABULARY

Motif: a theme, idea, or object in a work of art that is repeated.

Abstract: represented objects that do not appear as they do in real life.

From left to right: *Red Clouds*, 1975, 5.8x4";
Prayer, 1974 36 1/4 x 24 13/16"; *Work 69.5*, 1969,
32 5/16 x 20 11/16."



Next Generation Sunshine State Standards: K-5

Enduring Understanding 1: The arts are inherently experiential and actively engage learners in the processes of creating, interpreting, and responding to art.

Big Idea: Skills, Techniques, and Processes

Benchmark: VA.2.S.1.In.a: Produce artwork influenced by personal decisions and ideas.

Next Generation Sunshine State Standards: 6-12

Enduring Understanding 3: The processes of critiquing works of art lead to development of critical-thinking skills transferable to other contexts.

Big Idea: Critical Thinking and Reflection

Benchmarks: VA.912.C.3.2: Develop and apply criteria to determine how aesthetic works are aligned with a personal definition of "art."

COMPARE & CONTRAST WESTERN AND EASTERN ARTWORKS: 6-12

Session Activity: In this activity, students will be asked to compare and contrast artworks by Kenji Kusaka with works from western art movements such as Abstract Expressionism and Color Field paintings.

Objectives: Students will be asked to identify similar formal qualities between artworks from different origins. They will also recognize differentiating qualities between various aspects in the works.

Materials: Students will be given images of different artworks from Kenji Kusaka as well as from western art movements.

Activity Procedures: Students will be shown images of Kenji Kusaka's work that feature his egg and cloud motif as well as works by Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters. Students will be split into small groups of four or five. Each group will be asked to compare and contrast an image of Kusaka's with an artwork from these western movements, looking for similarities and differences in the style of the work, in themes and motifs, as well as line and color or other elements like space, shape, value or texture. Students will be asked to create a group PowerPoint with each group contributing their research on the two images they have chosen. Each group will include information on Kenji Kusaka as well as the artist and works to which they are comparing and contrasting Kusaka's. All groups will combine their smaller PowerPoints into one large PowerPoint. The collaborative PowerPoint will then be presented to the class to give information on Kusaka as well as the two western movements.



Vir Heroicus Sublimis, Barnett Newman, oil on canvas, 7' 11 3/8" x 17' 9 1/4", 1950-51.



Green Blue Red, Ellsworth Kelly, oil on canvas, 67 1/2" x 90", 1963.



Harran II, Frank Stella, polymer on canvas, 10'x20', 1967.