The New York Times Style Magazine | https://nyti.ms/3cYol2W

The Japanese Artist Turning Fruits and Vegetables Into Sculpture

Ikebana's most irreverent practitioner, the 80-year-old Kosen Ohtsubo, finds beauty in the banal.

This piece, "Cabbage Tree" (2020), created from cabbage leaves wrapped around a gnarled log that Kosen Ohtsubo purchased from a neighbor, was made exclusively for T. It was photographed at the Zama shrine, in Kanagawa, Japan, the original structure of which stood for at least six centuries before being rebuilt in 1927 after a fire.

By Motoko Rich

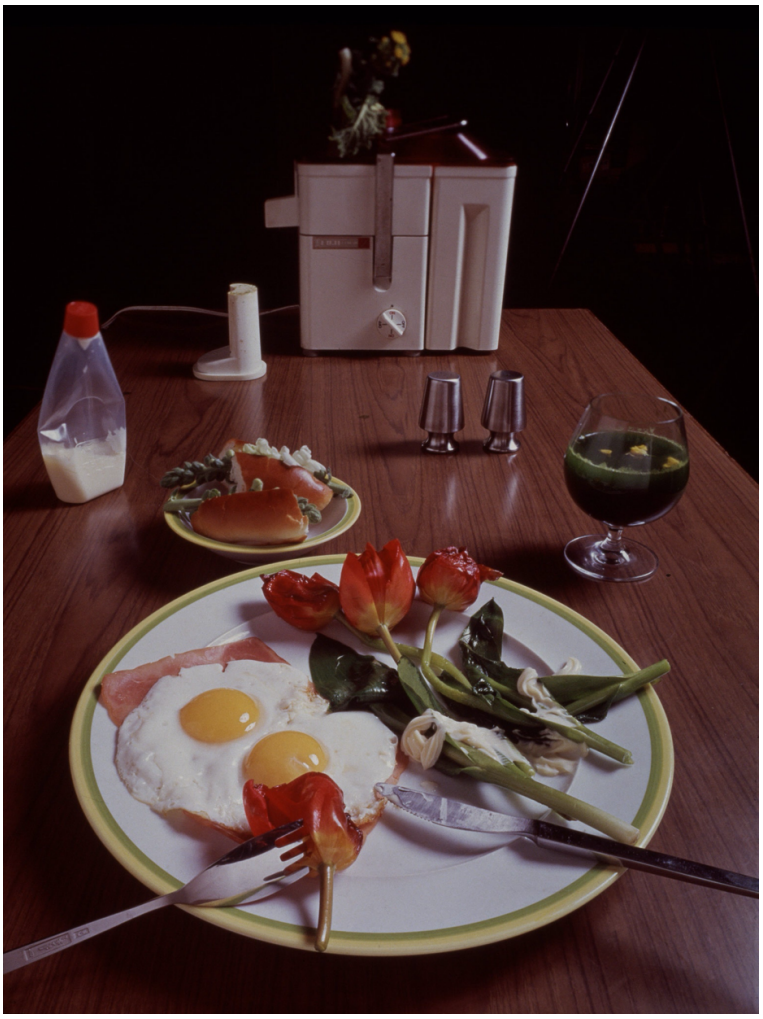
April 28, 2020

On a January afternoon, in his stained-wood-floored studio in the Tokyo suburb of Tokorozawa, the artist Kosen Ohtsubo fingered a large cabbage leaf, its edges a bit too curled and droopy for a salad. "It's about three days old," he said. "Great material."

Wilted cabbage doesn't usually come to mind when one thinks of ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging with origins in the sixth century. But for close to five decades, Ohtsubo has been one of ikebana's most unorthodox practitioners, his work a subversion of the spare formality and elegant materials that are the hallmarks of the form. "I want to explode the idea of beautiful ikebana," said Ohtsubo, who uses blooms and branches as he sees fit but is just as likely to work with hunks of watermelon, scraps of garbage or piles of daikon — Japanese radishes the size and shape of plump forearms. He once created a piece by throwing tomatoes at a wall.

"In a way, rebellion is my signature," said Ohtsubo, 80. "I have always felt I was fighting against something." And yet, he's not purely interested in rebellion for its own sake — Ohtsubo's impulses are at heart egalitarian. He was a student in the Ryusei school of ikebana, which gained renown in the Meiji era and is known for its relatively freestyle approach — practitioners are encouraged to experiment with materials and work outside of the classical three-branch form, in which each stalk represents either heaven, earth or humankind. The artist, who is a jazz fan (Albert Ayler's 1965 "Spiritual Unity" is a favorite), appreciated this improvisational philosophy. Still, he disliked that the default materials were what he considered to be elitist: traditional flowers like irises or lilies, or the branches of pine or plum trees. "There is this generally held idea that expensive branches make the piece," he said. "So if you don't have money, you can't create beautiful work."

The artist's "I Am Taking a Bath Like This" (1984). Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery



His "Mr. O's Breakfast" (1973). Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery

Vegetables, of course, are prosaic and cheap. They aren't meant to be looked at so much as consumed, and if you wait long enough, they begin to smell. This fact, especially, tended to bother more traditional masters when they first encountered Ohtsubo's work at exhibitions, but he believes that the vegetable's potential for visceral decay only adds to its artistic promise. Take the cabbage: "Its entire form and fragrance really changes over the course of just a few days," he said. In fact, his philosophy fulfills two of ikebana's core aims: to express the impermanence of beauty and to showcase beauty that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. What's more, vegetables tether humans to the natural world. Many of them come from the ground, after all, while elegant branches are pulled, Ohtsubo says, from "the top of the mountain."

Born in 1939 in Ashio Dozan, which is in the central Tochigi Prefecture and was the site of a notoriously polluting 19th-century copper mine, Ohtsubo was the middle son of the village's deputy mayor. Often, he was left alone to wander the mountains surrounding the village, once getting so lost that he ended up spending the night at an inn before finding his way home. "Back in those days, everyone had four or five

children, and if you weren't the eldest son, you weren't really treasured," he said. When a local woman offered ikebana lessons, he decided to enroll. "There were a lot of beautiful girls in the class," said Ohtsubo, who wears eyeglasses with Playboy Bunnies imprinted on the temples.

In 1960, he moved to Tokyo and studied under the Ryusei master Kasen Yoshimura. But Ohtsubo feared he'd be unable to make a living as an artist. He enrolled as an engineering student at Tokyo Denki University, but the pull of ikebana was too strong. And so he returned to the Tokyo Ryusei school, joining the staff as an apprentice. Right away, Ohtsubo was back to breaking convention, sourcing materials from farms, groceries and dumpsters, and even inserting himself into his work, which leaned increasingly toward contemporary art: For "I Am Taking a Bath Like This" (1984), he photographed himself sitting in a tub filled with *kakitsubata* (Japanese iris) leaves. He's been looking for new and unexpected ways into his medium ever since. One day, while watching his wife make cabbage rolls, he thought, "This is ikebana," and created a large, spade-shaped sculpture covered in boiled cabbage.

An untitled work by Ohtsubo (1989). Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery

Ohtsubo's "Rock'n'Roll Radish Tower I" (1989). Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery

“Ohtsubo was the first of his kind,” said Haruyoshi Nishikawa, the editor in chief of Nihon Jhosei Shimbun, a newspaper that specializes in stories about ikebana and the Japanese tea ceremony. “He has created his own ikebana, and that has greatly inspired people.” The Hong Kong-based Empty Gallery is currently planning to stage a show of Ohtsubo’s new and recreated works, and will also feature some of them at future art fairs.

In the meantime, Ohtsubo is still working and still teaching, even if he’s often disappointed by his students’ timidity. “So many of them simply conform to their surroundings and obediently carry out their lives,” he said. “It’s as if there’s some big master monitoring young people’s activities and saying, ‘Don’t do anything stupid.’” I asked if he’d heard of the conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan’s recent artwork “Comedian” — of a banana pinned to the wall with duct tape. He hadn’t, but grinned when I showed him a picture. “Oh, interesting,” Ohtsubo said. “The banana is one of the materials I want to try.”

Motoko Rich is the Tokyo bureau chief. She has covered a broad range of beats at The Times, including real estate (during a boom), the economy (during a bust), books and education. @motokorich • Facebook