

H Jonathan Klijn

Reviewing the Arts Jour E-157

Instructor Jeremy C. Fox

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Short Book Review

A Small Book with Big Reach

I recently stole a book. It answered a need to see something in a fresh way. A need which I am invested in not by choice, as some would have us believe, but by legacy and birthright. Stole is a big word. Borrowed. It was a little *treat yo'self* for hosting the first exhibition of eight AIDS quilt panels in South-Western Wisconsin. An event which coincided with the annual Pride Festival in Mineral Point, the town I like to visit on weekends and am proud to call my home away from home, away from home. I'm giving the book back to the owner of the coffee shop soon, although he said I may keep it as he sensed I had need for it.

It's called *Wabi-Sabi* by Leonard Koren. I highly recommend it. It's a guide for artists, designers, and poets who need to make lemonade from cracks in pavements and broken vases. It's a sweet little book from 1994 which must have elicited some great conversations over red wine and Mary Jane among GenX slackers. The tiny tome dispenses wisdoms about the impermanence of things, imperfections, overlooked greatness, and beauty coaxed out of repugnance.

It got me thinking about the wabi-sabi of us. The us on those quilts. Our elders whose shoulders we stand on. These beautiful, innocent men whose lives were cut tragically short. Feared by society, denied by politicians, and convenient gaslighting for religious wing-nuts, some of whom spew the same rancor today.

Using my wabi-sabi booklet as a guide, it was true. These lives exemplify impermanence, but not nothingness. Don't confuse the two. And don't see it as imperfect life choices or defectiveness. Imperfections ~~should~~ must be fêted. Perhaps we could aim not to reflect sanctioned value systems as

flagrant flaunting of perceived flaws. Try not to view these lives as disregarded greatness: forgotten and dismissed. Sown into every panel is proof of accomplishment and tributes by mourning friends and family. We could simply choose to regard them. See them.

Most of all, facing ugly prejudice in their lives, yet represented here in gigantic displays of love, we see immense wide-eyed innocence. And paralyzing hurt. These quilts bear witness to more than a “faggot plague.” *Mauvais sang*. They’re more than conversation killers or something to cover your kid’s eyes from. More than a Debby-Downer-Duvet-Collection for perpetual schadenfreude. They are a spiritual contact point attesting to hope carved out of pain. Shrines to resilience, the quilts channel stouthearted spirit. It’s a privilege to voyeuristically peek into lives and feel inspired to be a voice for equality. We do stand, with pride, on broad shoulders.

I think I’ll call the guy at the coffee shop. I don’t think I’m done with this book after all.