

## Special Theme

### Ethno-graphic Collaborations: Crossing Borders with Multimodal Illustration

# Turning Points

## Laura Haapio-Kirk

*Department of Anthropology, University College London*

## Megumi Ito

*Independent Artist*

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## Abstract

Megumi Ito is an artist living in rural Kōchi Prefecture, Japan. In this painting she depicts her life course as she approaches the age of fifty, capturing how she sees her life as composed of contrasts: day and night, mountain and river, countryside and city life, sorrow and joy. She also depicts the move that her family made from Tokyo to a small rural town in Kōchi Prefecture following the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown that brought devastation to Japan in March 2011. Her explanation of the meaning behind the various elements of the painting are embedded as audio files in the artwork that the viewer is invited to explore in a non-linear way. Megumi uses traditional Japanese materials such as washi paper, handmade brushes, natural pigments, and glue to make her paintings. The pigments are the same ones that she used 25 years ago when starting out on her artistic journey, and are derived from nature, including oyster shells and minerals. Using these materials connects her to the craftsmanship that goes into their production, celebrating precious knowledge and skills.

Laura Haapio-Kirk conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the town where Megumi lives in 2018-19. Two years after returning from fieldwork, through a remote collaboration combining digital tools and analogue artistic methods, Laura and Megumi discussed how Megumi's thoughts and perceptions about life had changed. Megumi's painting, shown here, was used as a medium for object elicitation during the interview. The piece combines both Megumi's painting and edited interview clips, demonstrating how such collaborations between researcher and research participant can creatively combine elicitation tools and modes of dissemination. The life story method is adapted to the non-linear graphic and collaborative format, inviting the viewer to make connections between different visual and narrative elements as Megumi does when thinking about the interconnectedness of life events across time and space.

**Key Words:** painting elicitation, migration, Japan, ikigai, life purpose



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## Transcription



Numbers added in the image on the left refer to the transcription for the voiceover of each scene.

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**Megumi Ito**

When I was a child, I had a dream. I wanted to be a children's book painter and I loved reading the children's book. At that time, I was really dreaming, just only dreaming, but gradually I started learning art more seriously. The sky part of this painting is representing my childhood dreams to be a painter, to be an artist, yes, but it was just a dream. You know, you see, here is the girl reading a book and the girl drawing a painting on it. It's near sunshine. Yeah, so it's something that just an image occurred in my mind when I was child.

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**Megumi Ito**

My dreams almost came true because my solo exhibition started, and I had three solo exhibitions when I was 22 and 23, at that kind of age. But I met this guy and suddenly my career stopped because of the marriage, but I chose this way. I didn't want to stop drawing, but also I wanted to have another dream with my husband. So, I followed his dream. So, that was bakery. So, we got married and we started running bakeries together. This painting representing my marriage and the time we got kids and running a bakery together.

**Megumi Ito**

Yes, it's like the highlight of my lifetime.

**Megumi Ito**

Yes, at that time, only looking on the bright side of life, so it is not just happy but also not knowing the deep meaning of life. It's happiness, but I didn't realize that this is the moment of our life happening just one time. Yes, it doesn't last forever, so I was happy, yes exactly. But on the other hand, as I mentioned before, I quit painting at that time, so it always kills me. Every time I look back upon my life, I always wanted to keep on drawing, but I couldn't get enough energy for this hard work because I had two kids and three bakeries to run, so I couldn't get a chance to keep on doing it. After several years of marriage, I managed to have one solo exhibition. It's an image of the rice fields I travelled before and some of the painting reflects of my travel memory of Kochi. It's amazing. At that time, I didn't expect that I would live in Kochi.

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**Megumi Ito**

It's surprising but I chose the theme of my graduation work. The theme was the rice fields. And I went to the northern part of Japan at that time. But I couldn't find the perfect place, so I bought this photo book and it's all about rice fields. And I looked at the painting and pictures and I took the image of the rice fields from looking in the photo book. Yes, so the theme was 'the rice fields'. It's an abstract painting but the image I wanted to draw was the rice fields, fields and the natural phenomenon and everything is that I got. And I drew on the flat painting.

### **Megumi Ito**

Yes, the shape is unique. People made rice fields to crop, to have rice for their own lives. But it turned out the shapes are so unique, and I was fascinated by watching those unique shapes from the valleys, the top of the valley and the bottom. Yeah, to me it's cute and beautiful.

### **Megumi Ito**

In Tokyo or some Kanto area, the rice fields are always the same shape; it's for the machine, it's for the farmers. They can crop the rice by moving machines easily so that they can get a lot of rice. But on that photo book there are so many tiny, tiny rice fields' photos. So, I was fascinated by those shapes. So, I looked at this photo book later. And I realized there is one picture that was taken nearby my house here in Kochi. After 25 years, I realized that there is one picture that was taken nearby my house. It gives me goosebumps. I was so surprised to see, and at the same time I was destined to be here, I thought.

### **Megumi Ito**

'Unmei' is destiny so, yes, 'unmei-teki'.

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### **Megumi Ito**

In the countryside, yes, there are many inconvenient things, but we got water from the river, and we got LP gas. In the city, there is a gas pipeline under the ground, but here in the countryside, we put LP gas, the gas 'bonbe', gas tank. Yeah, water supply is okay, and gas is fine and food. We have a lot of, lot of food storage behind the farmers' house, so we can get rice from our friend's house, you know, not permanently but only for a few weeks, it's fine. We got veggies and we got chickens and eggs, and milk from the cow from the neighbor, so I imagine that we can keep on living in this size of countryside, a small countryside where you can keep your living after the tragic thing happens. I got a big watermelon today, two of them. And last night I got half size of the watermelon from different guy, so now we have two and a half watermelons in my house. Many local people, they are so kind and they always think about our family, especially our daughters, so it's so heartwarming and touching.

### **Megumi Ito**

I wouldn't say that I really love countryside because of the nature. I live in the 21st century, so I can't live without iPhone, Netflix and Amazon, and AmazonTV. I watch Korean dramas, K-dramas, every night by watching Netflix or something like that. You can choose any program from all over the world, even though you live in the very countryside in far east or far west of Japan.

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### **Megumi Ito**

In the city, you are always surrounded by a lot of temptations. Once you step outside your door, there are many fancy shops and a lot of people you will encounter everyday, so it's a busy life. You keep on catching the images everyday and every time. But in the countryside when you are by yourself and driving in a car, then you will be only by yourself and when you look outside the car it's only mountains and rivers, no human being at all, sometimes. I would say I can get time to think about myself or think

about my artwork rather than living in the city.

Imagination takes time, I think. You can't imagine something by watching TV or by studying very hard at the same time, so you need some silence and focus time for yourself. It has been 10 years since I came here, so now I understand the difference between city life and the country life, and you don't have to choose which is better. It depends on the people who wants to choose. The one thing I wanted to tell people who live in the city side that please come and see this nature by yourselves, even though it's just visiting or travelling, yes. It's a wonderful part of your country, Japan. The beautiful Japanese culture still lives on here in the countryside, but its dying. It's dying because people here they believe that it's not needed anymore in this modern society, but it's not. From now on, the agriculture or crop by yourself will be a very important phrase

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**Megumi Ito**

Yes, this is very important. The contrast of living and death.

**Megumi Ito**

Yes.

**Megumi Ito**

This right side is our life right now. We are living here, but there it's our family and Shige's coffin here in the bottom, so it's death and life, living, continuing even now.

Do you know Yin and Yang? It's a concept of ancient Chinese natural philosophy, and it's focused on the balance between Yin and Yang energies. Especially on this painting, my latest work; it's a contrast of happiness and not a bad thing but happiness and lonely, or light and dark, and night and daytime, and river and the mountain, cities and countryside. Even though you think it's a bad thing happening to you right now, it's not a bad thing. That's just only one side. After several years, after sometime, you realize that that was the turning point of your life to change to a better side or finding a different myself. I think that depends on the people, yes.

Of course, I sometimes complain about myself, but I try not to think in a bad way only. When you were young, you will never imagine when you are becoming an old lady. Me too, but I'm almost 50 now, then I will imagine how many more years left to me. As I told you, my husband passed away at the age of 47. He was exactly the same age of myself. His birthday and my birthday is only 4 days different, but his life ended but my life kept on going. I think I have started counting from the day after his death, so now I know, I really know that there will be an end for sure. Yes, that's really changed; from that moment, I changed my way of thinking for myself and for everything surrounding me.

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**Megumi Ito**

These things here representing the city life and the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, this leads us to the

countryside. Here, this is the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, I drew, and this is Tokyo. Without this tragedy, we wouldn't come to the countryside, so this was our lifetime changing point, turning point. So, my husband and I decided to move to the western Japan because of this explosion. So, I thought city life is very weak once a disaster happens. Even though you haven't to lose your house, your life is depending on the mass consumer. In the supermarket, there was no product at all after few days later, and we had to line to get gas for more than 1 hour. Even in the middle of Tokyo, so it was almost a panic. Our house is still there and nothing has changed, but it's changed a lot and we realized that city life is very weak when something bad happens.

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### **Megumi Ito**

The clock is moving so are you really sure that to live like this? I ask to myself. Are you going to live yourself by crying everyday or complaining about your situation or feel envy to other people? No. I don't want to live like that. I want to be happy to myself and my children will be looking at me every day, so I decided to live selfishly. Selfish means not always a good meaning but to me, I always helped someone without my hoping. I always supported someone in my life, especially the last 20 some years, so from now on, I try to live my life.

That's connecting to *Ikigai*. *Ikigai* to me is something that I love to do but also it needs lots and lots of effort to keep it on my mind every day. Sometimes, finding *Ikigai* or keep on having *Ikigai* on your mind is tough, so I try not to look at it but now I'm focusing on thinking about *Ikigai* every day.

As I grew older, I began to think that you should focus on your lifetime left to yourself. Maybe, it's only 10 years left or 20 years left, I don't know but someday you will die. When you die, you shouldn't leave your regret.

Yes, when I was young, I wouldn't think this way. I just chose the right side and just imagined the good things only but now I know the reality. When I look back at my life, especially the tough and sad, the most difficult time, I can't remember well. It's like things that are happening in the mist. I can't imagine the picture. Yes, so it's like a dream to me. Sometimes it's a nightmare but still it really happened to me, so these happy moments or sad moments becoming a part of me and becoming dreams someday.