

"Shaded Path"



Art by a thousand cuts

Waterloo man's intricate creations are inspired by longtime fascination with Japan

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM

With each tiny cut of a sharp knife, artist Mark Yungblut transforms a black piece of paper into a majestic Japanese temple or cherry blossoms as delicate as the real thing.

His steady hand knows where it should go; he has planned each of a thousand cuts before his knife touches the paper.

Bit by bit, a Japanese rice field, a sake storehouse, a temple or a shrine appears in the cuts that he makes in the black paper. When he places the finished paper cutting on top of a blank sheet of white paper, the

Mark Yungblut of Waterloo makes precise cuts while creating artwork using a Japanese technique called kiri-e.

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A mentor in Japan has helped Mark Yungblut perfect traditional techniques while also exploring new directions.

effect is compelling.

Occasionally, he adds coloured paper under the leaves, flowers or other features to make them come alive. Adding colour is a more common practice among younger Japanese artists, he says.

It takes a total of 15 to 25 hours of intense work before the art piece is done.

“Most often, people comment on the detail,” he says. “I am patient and I’m fairly stubborn. If it’s going to take awhile, that’s fine.”

Yungblut, 35, of Waterloo, is a mental-health crisis worker as well as an accomplished artist with a passion for Japanese paper cutting, or *kiri-e*.

Though he is not Japanese, he has been interested in Japan’s history and architecture since he was a teenager, and his knowledge is reflected in his choice of subjects and skill with the knife.

“He’s quite exceptional in what he does,” says James Heron, executive director of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in

Toronto, which promotes Japanese culture and Japanese Canadian heritage.

“The quality of what Mark does stands up against the top work I’ve seen in Japan,” says Heron, who has Yungblut’s “gorgeous” paper cutting of a Japanese storefront in his home. The cultural centre has hosted shows of Yungblut’s work and used his art on the cover of its newsletter.

“I think he’s a guy who exhibits a lot of characteristics that Japanese people admire – humility, modesty. He’s not showy and he lets his art speak for him,” Heron says. “I think people look at Mark and they see sincerity both in him and the work he produces.”

Almost exclusively, Yungblut uses his own photographs in his paper-cutting art.

In his studio upstairs in the gracious home he shares with his wife, Fumie Shimoda, daughter Mina Shimoda-Yungblut, 11, and son Kanji Shimoda-Yungblut, 9, Yungblut uses his computer to make a printout of

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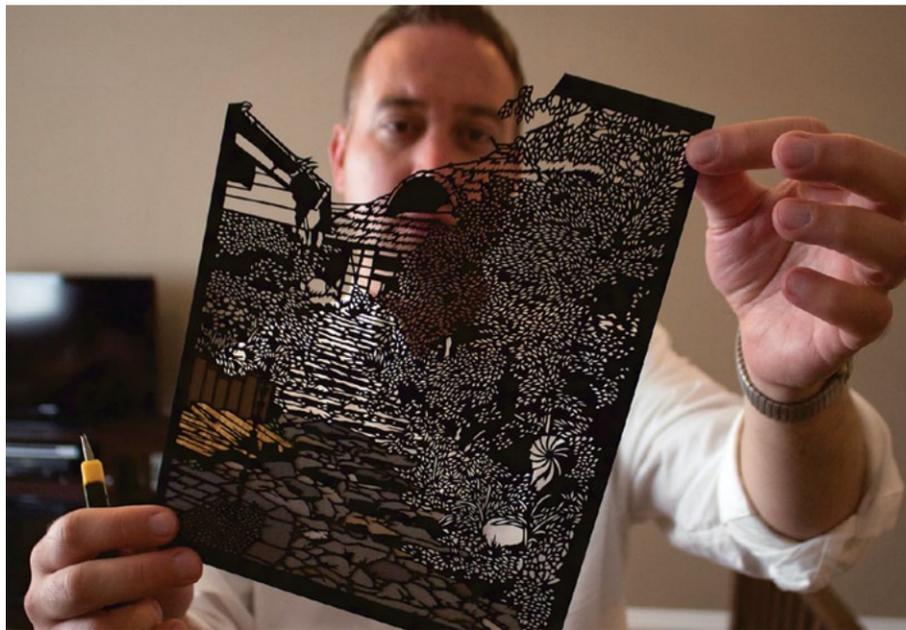
“Setsuko Hara”



“Shodenzan Tahoto”

Mark Yungblut's designs, which are based on his photographs, are carefully planned before he begins cutting.

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BELOW RIGHT: "Torii"
BELOW: "Sunset"



a photograph. He lays it on top of a black piece of paper on a cutting mat. With a marker, he draws on the printout, each place that he will cut. Then, with a sharp knife given to him by his kiri-e mentor in Japan, he cuts into the photocopy and the black paper underneath. "The hardest part is coming up with the drawing or composition to work from," he says. "The physical labour of cutting out, if you enjoy it, is not the hard part. It's coming up with the composition.

"It's figuring out what to keep and take out and manipulating it a bit. It's interesting. To make things look more real, you have to alter them."

His teacher in Japan urges him to cut less to create shadow and contrast. "He tells me these tiny, tiny cuts will look better if large

spaces aren't cut." Yungblut is also studying ukiyo-e, or woodblock prints, to learn how older Japanese artists constructed a composition.

Because he has planned carefully before he begins, he rarely makes a cut that he doesn't intend.

Yungblut knows few people in Canada who do his style of paper cutting. "Part of what I enjoy is the fact it is uncharted, the way I'm doing it."

The addition of colour gives his kiri-e a unique perspective.

"Traditional kiri-e is beautiful but is simple black and white," says Yuka Kerr, who with her husband, Peter Kerr, is a longtime friend.

"From his Canadian point of view, he tries different ways with colourful paper. It's his evolution of kiri-e," says Yuka, who was born in Japan. The Kerrs have three pieces of Yungblut's kiri-e, including a commissioned paper cutting with colour of their Tudor-style home in Waterloo.

"He cut these teeny bricks with his big hand," Yuka says. "All three pieces are different approaches to kiri-e, which I love."

New Hamburg-area artist Gloria Kagawa is impressed with Yungblut's dedication and talent.

"I was just amazed at all the artwork and the intricacy," says Kagawa, a painter and printmaker who is third-generation Japanese.

"The amount of work he does is just unbelievable. He has a full-time job and family, and it just gets better and better," she says.

Every night, Yungblut works on his art for two or three hours after the children have gone to bed and before his shift as a service co-ordinator for the Canadian Mental Health Association begins at midnight.

Listening to 1970s soul music, classical music, lectures or story tapes – scores of CDs are on shelves beside his desk – Yungblut focuses on his art. On this day,

"The quality of what Mark (Yungblut) does stands up against the top work I've seen in Japan."

JAMES HERON, JAPANESE CANADIAN CULTURAL CENTRE

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he is listening to the classic novel "Moby-Dick," by Herman Melville.

As a social worker who works nights, he is mostly on the telephone helping people cope with crises related to mental health – panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, addictions and other issues. He listens, connects them with resources and does the paperwork to get them the help they need.

"We get a lot of calls from parents of teenagers who don't know what to do," he says. "A lot of time, just the act of talking to us is therapeutic, but they also need the concrete steps to take."

To counter the sedentary nature of his work and art, he plays in a basketball league. He also has a third-degree black belt in karate.

While his profession is rewarding, Yungblut thinks his art may answer a desire to have something tangible for his labours.

"My art is labour intensive, but I enjoy doing it. It's so different from the work that I do and I can just lose myself in it."

How Yungblut came to love kiri-e is more a story of destiny than anything else, he says.

He was born in Hanover and raised in Regina and Mississauga, which all seemed as far away from Japan as he could be. The son of an agricultural consultant and a quality assurance worker in pharmaceuticals, he has no Japanese roots.

But as a teenager, he was fascinated with Japanese history and culture. In high school, he liked to do pencil drawings of Japanese castles and Samurai armour.

He went to the University of Waterloo because it had a Japanese language program. He studied Japanese at the affiliated Renison University College while

working on his degree in social development studies. After that, he got his degree in social work.

He fell in love with Shimoda, a Japanese-born language teacher there, and they married in 2005.

Then, quite by chance, he met Yasuyuki Okamura, a retired man who would introduce him to kiri-e and become his cherished teacher, during his and Shimoda's first trip together to Japan in 2002 to visit family.

"He had the same interest in buildings and black and white," Shimoda says. "My friend's father didn't speak English and Mark wasn't proficient in Japanese and somehow they communicated without me."

Yungblut was doing pencil drawings then. Okamura, who has become like a "kindred spirit," showed him his own kiri-e in the traditional black and white and urged

Yungblut to try it.

Yungblut wasn't immediately successful. The paper ripped; he didn't like it. He took more of his pencil drawings to Japan the next year and explained to his teacher that it hadn't worked out. Okamura gave him a better knife and a cutting mat and asked him to try again.

The next pieces were better and by 2006, Yungblut was hooked. "Most people I showed it to had never seen it before."

He is often questioned about his affinity for kiri-e – an artform that seems foreign to his life experience. He searches for an answer to give them.

"I wonder all the time, but it's almost like asking someone what their favourite food is and why is it steak?" he says.

"It probably is chance at some level . . . but given that the odds of me meeting the gentleman who taught me this are so minute,

and given how much I love it, it seems there is more at play than just random.

"For Japanese here too, if they've seen my artwork and they meet me, they're surprised I'm not Japanese as well. They ask 'why?' I just love it. That's all there is," he says.

"His interest is very authentic and very deep," says Shimoda, who is projects coordinator of East Asian Studies and teaches Japanese language courses to undergraduate students at Renison University College.

"I was born and raised in Japan, but I can't do this," she says, motioning to her husband's art. "It's destiny; just meant to be."

Each time Yungblut visits his wife's hometown an hour from Tokyo, he feels more and more at ease. He can hold a basic conversation in Japanese.

His comfort level has a lot to do with the

kind of man he is, friends say.

"He's this tall, Canadian guy but inside he is almost like a Japanese," Yuka Kerr says. "He has a cheerful side and a very serious side, quiet and introspective."

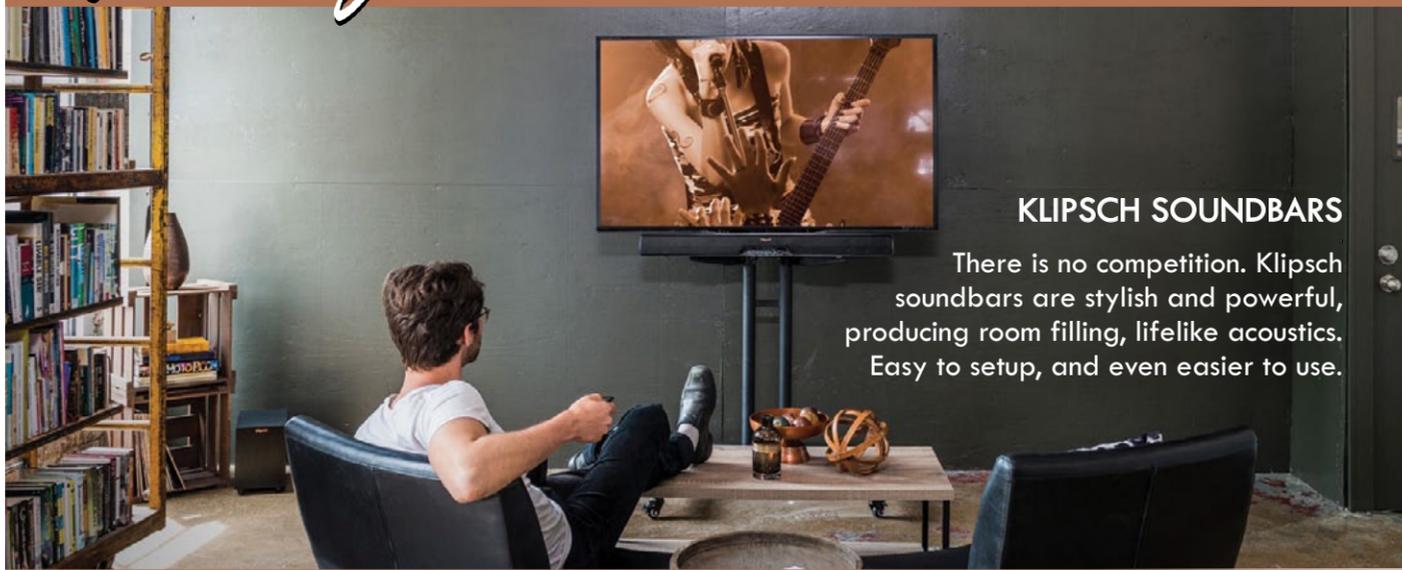
Nevertheless, his appearance in parts of Japan where there are few others like him makes heads turn.

"I know I stick out like a sore arm because I'm a foot taller – six foot three or six foot four – than anyone," Yungblut says, smiling. "My wife's hometown is an hour from Tokyo. There aren't really tourist areas."

"Other than in Tokyo, you can count the number of non-Japanese on one hand. . . . But I don't feel that out of place. I kind of fit in better than other people. My personality is more quiet and calm, a better listener than speaker."

This year, Yungblut and his family were in Japan visiting relatives for 22 days in

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"Shodenzan Flags"

August. He took 2,200 photographs, and ventured into rural areas for a couple of days on his own to photograph smaller temples, rice fields, old-style houses.

The weather, which was at least 36 C and very humid, doesn't seem to affect him when he's in his element taking photographs.

"We stay at shaved ice stores and when he sees all the buildings and nature, I don't think he feels the temperature," Shimoda says, laughing.

After seeing a postcard of one of his paper cuttings, a monk invited him inside a temple that contained treasured carvings. It's not common for local people to receive such an invitation, let alone a Canadian.

"It feels like destiny," Yungblut says.

"Every time I'm over there, I get these opportunities that kind of fall into my lap that foreigners don't get."

Now, Yungblut is working on paper cuttings that will contrast the rural and urban scenes that he saw. He and his family went to the top of the Tokyo Skytree, which at 634 metres is the world's highest free-standing broadcast tower. There were buildings as far as they could see. "Tokyo is overwhelming," he says. "When you go into Tokyo, it's like a sea of people."

Yungblut's work has been shown in Japan, China and throughout Ontario. He has exhibited and conducted workshops at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. In 2016, he was featured at the Anime North



Mark Yungblut is shown on one of his visits to Japan. Usually he is behind the camera. On a holiday last August, for example, he took 2,200 photos.

convention in Toronto and at Kitchener Public Library, which hosted an exhibit and demonstration. He has also been displaying his art at the East Asian Festival at University of Waterloo for more than 10 years.

He received an award from the mayor of Tokyo for his art in 2011. And he was honoured when the Consulate General of Japan in Toronto added his name to its contact list of cultural artisans shared among all Japanese consulates and embassies in North America.

One day, Yungblut would like to have a gallery where he can teach and sell his art.

Yungblut is indebted to his Japanese teacher for introducing him to kiri-e, helping him improve and taking him to new locations in Japan to photograph.

"He just gives me so much of his time and energy. There's no way I can repay him.

"I think it's pay-it-forward. Someday I'll find a protégé to pass it on to." 

Mark Yungblut sells his art through his website, www.japanesepapercutting.com and his email, markyungblut@hotmail.ca. As well, it is often hanging in Cobblestone Gallery in Waterloo, where it can be purchased.



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