

Torii

by Midori Fujioka



From the moment I first saw Torii on the Djerassi website, I was hooked. Not only because I'm attracted to Japanese things but because Torii seemed to have a special meaning with roots in northern California—a meaning that became clearer and deeper during my artist residency in May.

As I walked from my Diane Middlebrook studio up a steep hill, I passed the “Yield to Whim” sign and the phone bench. Small brown rabbits with white cotton ball tails hopped by me. I meditated on each step and each breath in the early morning fog. Next, I observed a landscape of rolling green hills as a family of five deer leaped into view. I worried that I disturbed their privacy, and stopped in my tracks to await their passage. They danced across the road and up to the next hill, heading southeast with a fawn in tow. There were two more hills ahead before reaching the

gate near Bruce Beasley's silver metallic sculpture, *Aristus*. As I walked, I noticed the flowers and met other wildlife along the way. This journey became my daily pilgrimage to visit Torii. I wondered about its presence and definition in America.

Since I practice the daily art of Japanese calligraphy, I discovered that Torii can be a catalyst for creativity and inspiration using calligraphy brush, ink, and rice paper. In the Japanese language, Torii, pronounced with a long "EE" sound (TOH-REE), is represented by a combination of two picture grams or characters called kanji. The first kanji means bird (TORI).



The second kanji is a perch or abode or gate (I), pronounced EE.



Every day I approached Torii, I contemplated its significance. In my view, Torii represents a gateway to a sacred space. It is a living entity and a form of generative art. Torii at Djerassi has

been an example of generative art for over thirty years. Generative art isn't something we build with definitive plans, materials, and tools. It's grown; much like a tree is grown. It's organic and emergent. That's how I felt when I visited it each day. I saw patches of lichen thriving on one side of the structure. Next to the lichen, I noticed a weathering of the old growth redwood that revealed textures of rough waves made by the artist's chain saw. On another morning, I witnessed two black ravens perched on the top looking out to sea. One foggy day at 8 o'clock during my second week, I came upon the gray mist and fast moving cumulus clouds which seemed to enter and flow through Torii as it stood tall against the wind and cold, ever so stable and present. A variety of lizards and insects made their home at its base.

I had to find out more about the artist who made it. This led me to Bruce Johnson, a sculpture artist from the Bay Area who settled in Sonoma County with his family. In the 1980s, Bruce travelled to Japan and was inspired by Japanese

architecture, woodwork, and poetry. On May 15th, Bruce returned to the ranch to re-visit Torii, and we spent two days together.



Bruce Johnson with Torii

Photo: Midori Fujioka

According to Bruce, Carl Djerassi saw several of Johnson's salvaged old growth redwood sculptures at a gallery in Oakland and was struck by the size and enormity of the pieces. Even today, Bruce only uses salvaged redwood because the heart of his sculptures are old grown chunks that come from trees a thousand years old or more. He sees his work as small acts of preservation. The gallery owner put them together, and they began a correspondence from 1983 to 1984. Carl commissioned Bruce to build a redwood sculpture in honor of his late daughter, Pamela, and offered a residency at the ranch. Because of the necessary tools at his studio, Bruce decided to work at his yard instead of at Djerassi. He did visit the Artists' Ranch to ascertain where to install Torii, and he remembers hiking around the grounds—Carl with a life-sized silhouette of Torii—while they took snapshots of each other at various prospective locations. When Carl initially saw Torii, it reminded him of the symbol of pi.

*He said a path pointed to a perfect idyllic spot
He remembered a hill howled and sang a lot
I replied ocean winds roll in
He saw a mirror across the Pacific – the face of a
sacred sign
He envisioned a panorama so beautiful to the
eye!
I learned by heart haiku do not the petals flutter
down just like this
He planted Pamela's Torii here to grow by and by
I asked Bruce, "Now that you have seen Torii in
2017, what is its legacy; what would you like
future generations to know?" Bruce, now in his
70's, paused, then said, "I like the idea of the
unknown craftsman, so in a sense, I'd like the
future generation to have their own experience."
He looked out the window, and added, "Torii has
done well for over thirty years—I hope it will be
infinite." Indeed, Torii is an American
interpretation of a Japanese Shinto art form and
structure.*



Bruce Johnson with Torii

Photo: Midori Fujioka

*As I head west I freeze frame the journey back
a flock of quail *Callipepla californica* flits past
I see their dazzling movements – breezy, black
plume crown feathers upright
as they qua-quer'go in a row shuffle-shuffle
scurry-scurry little ones in flight
I am now ready to put words on paper again and
again
simply trust my hike up to Torii this morning*

comes to an end

*I walk down a hill approaching a curious long
fence*

*turned into inspirational mantra near a bench
Under clear bright skies I see miles of ocean
blue*

*R-E-F-L-E-C-T reads a white ribbon of secret
letters so true*

Djerassi Resident Artists Program was my first and only artist residency. Attending Djerassi provided a meaningful experience for me—it fed my soul. The gift of time helped me to grow in strength as a writer—a strength from which I draw again and again. Torii inspired me to see what I can create every day through the use of this eternal symbol.

Today, on my desk in San Francisco sits a wooden replica of Torii that Bruce and I constructed in the workshop; it stands next to a pile of dried lichen and forget-me-nots.