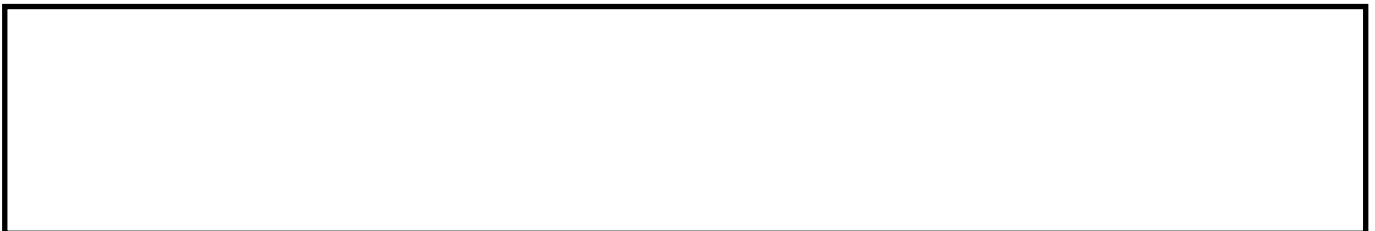


Japan blues: ao, ai, midori, aizome, ao-ja-shin.

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JAPAN BLUES

Ao, Ai, Midori, Aizome, Ao-ja-sbin

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These impressions of blue have come from reflecting on visitors responses to my use of the colour blue during a residency in Japan that focussed on making and exhibiting 24 24-hour cyanotype photograms. The exhibition was arranged as an act of remembrance, an anniversary of the ‘triple disaster’ that devastated the region in March 2011. It took place in a snow-covered Morioka, Japan, March 2015.

1 Ao, Ai, Midori青,藍, 緑: an inventory



あなたは緑と青を見分けることができますか？

Anata wa midori to ao o miwakeru koto ga dekimasuka?

Can you tell green from blue?

Some linguists use the word ‘grue’ to talk about languages where green and blue are protean categories, versatile if not exactly

interchangeable. Ao is a good example; in Japan, ao is the colour of grass and leaves, and traffic lights and the colour of the sky. It can be blue and green, or blue or green. It can also be an-almost black, if it is a horse’s coat, or be used to imply something pale, green, unripe, unready, unpalatable. The boundaries are not the same, but more than this, to think about blue in Japan, I also think of green.

I spent more than six months living in Sendai, the biggest city in the Tohoku region, which was perhaps the worst hit by the disaster. I lived in Aoba-ku, ‘the district of green-leaves’, just a short walk from the central avenue, Aoba-dori, which was named, I supposed, after the ancient *kiaki* (luscious-leaved, giant Japanese elm trees) that line the street. Walking down the street in summer, they arch overhead, end to end, appearing to touch, their crowns gracefully crowding out the cars and buses that weave their way down the avenue in flashes of red. When I think of Aobadori I think of these vibrant greens, the green of the forest in a city, an atmosphere of viridescence (becoming green), in shades that can’t quite be reproduced.

‘Midori’ is a name for green popularised during the American occupation of Japan after the Second World War. Midori didn’t exist at all until the ‘Heian’ or ‘peace’ period 794–1185. According to historians, this was the final era of classical Japan, a time of high art and literature effected profoundly by Buddhism and Taoism, among other Chinese influences. Japan’s traditional colour system, known as *dentourio* 伝統色 had been established not long before: in 603 by Prince Shot ku. This colour system was intimately connected with his ‘Twelve Level Cap and Rank System’ based on Confucian values and the five Chinese elements, a social ordering system that determined rank by merit rather than heritage and certain colours were used as symbols of rank in society. It is quite striking how many of his colours relate to plants, flowers and animals.

Ao, however, came long before. It is one of the four oldest colour terms, along with aka (red), kuro (black) and shiro (white). These words originally referred to contrasting sensations: light was aka, dark, kuro, clear, shiro. Ao, refers to a kind of vagueness, or obscurity of light. Blue is the sky, the ocean, vague light.

Blue is the only of these four original colours not to have a specific and sustained religious significance in Shinto (Japan's 'native' religion that incorporates the worship of ancestors and nature spirits, and is belief in 'kami', a sacred power that can be found in both the animate and inanimate). Red references the red torii gates of Shinto shrines; white the sacred places strung with 'shimenawa', the palest rope made of rice straw used in ritual purifications; monk's robes are almost-black. Only blue is secular. Blue is the colour of choice for school uniforms, in 'sailor style' and other classic navy variations, and associated with working class uniforms, and thus, work ethic.

The traditional Japanese Colour System is full of such vagaries, by which I mean wanderings. It includes ao-midori, a shade that one might assume can be easily 'translated' to a simple blue-green, like the familiar crayola-crayon colour the same blue-green since 1930. But not quite; ao-midori is a shade that totters on the very edge of the between, between blue, between green. It's a colour I can't quite match, it is neither numbered nor named on the 'Western' Panetone system. (It's close to the Caribbean green, but this has too much yellow, and the Sea green is too pale). After some thought, I settled on it being a kind of turquoise, but it is one that requires the opacity of the stone.

There are others from this system, more poetically, perhaps, translated. Colour in black and white.

'ao-kuchi-ba' is 'blue fallen leaves'.

'ao-ni' is 'the old mane of the blue-black cray'. But this is a yellow-green, closer to fresh asparagus, nestled next to the 'inch worm' of Panetone colour (RGB 178,236,93).

'ao-ni-bi' is 'blue dull'.

'usu-ao' makes me think of a lie (because 'uso' is a lie, or an exclamation of incredulity: "really?!" Really, it just means dim or gloomy).

'ai-nezumi' is an indigo-tinged grey; nezumi means mouse.

'mushi-ao' makes me think of insects, used to name bugs of all stripes, crickets, moths, worms. This kind of 'mushi' is after the blue iridescence of the jewel beetle's wings (*Chrysochroa fulgidissima*), and the shimmer of a deep sea shark.

(mushi-ba can also mean being worm-eaten! To be eaten by worms; to spoil; to ruin; to undermine; to gnaw at one's heart; to destroy).

Such greens can be 'glaucous'. Grey-greens becoming blue, becoming dull and pale, like the waxy leaves of cacti that don't get wet in the rain, or the grey-blue of the glaucous gull, camouflaging with sea, in an Aberdeen sky.

Blue reflects the ocean, and in Japan, this matters. The waters, the islands. Japan has six thousand eight hundred and fifty two (though only four hundred and thirty are inhabited). (I remember, years ago, proudly informing my Japanese students of Scotland's seven hundred and ninety, a figure I'd only just learned. Only later did I realise the extent to which the islands are essential to Japanese security, national and otherwise, in disputes with Russia and China).

I have not mentioned the tsunami. It is there, in the famous Hokkusai print, it's blue, the power of the waves; a religious terror of the overwhelming ocean.



2 Japan Blue

Aizome 藍染め is known as 'Japan blue'. A painter made the marks of these characters kanji in my sketchbook, pointing out the differences for me between ao (blue) and (ai) indigo, in doing so connecting the blues I was making with cyanotype blue prints to a larger culture history, one marked by labour, made of the earth.

Indigo, one of the oldest forms of colour dyeing - the oldest evidence of indigo dyeing in Japan dates back to the 10th century - can be obtained from a variety of plants including indigofera, strobilanthes and polygonum. In Japan it is made from tade, a native plant of the polygonaceae family. The process requires plant-based matter including sukumo (tade leaves), fusuma (wheat bran), sake, wood ash, and lime.

The compound indican from the raw leaves is converted by fermentation over a period of up to a year. Seeds are planted in March, and plants are harvested in July and August, then fermented and dried, which won't be done until the end of the year. Every week or so, the leaves are sprinkled with water and mixed. The result is sukumo. The dyer receives the sukumo and makes his mix with ash lye, sake, water - lots of water - and lime, which slows down the fermentation process. Then, with care, eventually the flowers form - ai no hana, the indigo flower, a nest of metallic bubbles, forming on the top of the dye. Now the dye is ready for use, in an abundance of colour variations, with depths perhaps not possible with chemical dyes. For aizome craftsmen, natural indigo is 'alive'.



3 Ao-ja-shin, Prussian Blue

One of the oldest synthetic pigments, Prussian Blue began to be imported to Japan from Europe, mainly Holland, in the 1820s. More vivid than the indigo made from the native plants, with a greater tonal range and resistance to fading and capable of expressing depth and distance, some art historians have suggested that it was responsible for establishing *pure landscape* as a new genre of ukiyo-e print making. Katsushika Hokusai used it for his Great Wave off Kanagawa, the wave I mention above.

Prussian blue was first synthesised in the early seventeen hundreds, by experimenting with how iron salts (ferrous salts) react with potassium ferro cyanide, a yellow anion (which is a negatively charged ion molecule). First, this process makes Berlin White, an insoluble compound. The white then oxidises to blue pigment. The blue occurs because of light being absorbed at the right wavelength for electron transfer. Modern, commercial, methods are not all that different from this three hundred year old process, though usually the (cheaper) sodium Ferro cyanide is used. Still, a multitude of hues, deep-blue pigments, composed of complex iron cyanides. Iron blues. Prussian blue has a reddish tint, but chemically similar pigments only have differences in shade because of variations in particle size. Iron blues are commonly mixed with yellows, like lead or zinc chromates, kinds of salt with metals, making greens.

I explained to visitors, often, how this colour, Prussian Blue, is also a medicine. Used as an antidote to heavy metal poisoning, it traps radioactive caesium in the gut, and from there it can be excreted, limiting the time of exposure within the body.

I had read that Prussian blue was used on the sheep hills of Wales after the Chernobyl Disaster. By spreading it on the soil, scientists hoped it might absorb radiation, inhibiting the uptake of Caesium 137 in the animals grazing on the green grass.

In many ways, Prussian blue is a blue of places

Prussian Blue

Berlin Blue

Paris Blue

All painters' blues.

A blue of traces. 'Ao-jashin' directly translates to 'blue-copy' or 'blue-trace', on other words, the blue print. The trace a palimpsest, in and of the landscape, but really, Prussian Blue is a blue expressed in material: in iron, Iron Blues.

Many blues.