

*Human, and We Live*

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Suikei Saito first held a writing brush when she was twelve. After marrying and raising a family, Saito began searching for something to enrich her life. As fate would have it, she once again encountered calligraphy. With a renewed commitment to calligraphy she accepted the challenge of a journey without end. Her glyphs, created by a woman who has lived as a wife and a mother, are full of vitality, an enveloping warmth, an innocent boldness, a subtle humility, and, above all, a sense of elegance.

Saito has adopted the theme “Human, and We Live,” for her first solo exhibition in the human melting pot of New York. In preparation, she has set to work exhaustively on the character 人, *hito*, human, writing it again and again. It is a strange character that looks almost like two people are holding out their hands to support each other. She also wrote the characters for the full range of human emotions. Having explored the meaning and history of each character, she expresses through intense thought, and in a state of no-mind, on paper. Her calligraphy is an act of meditation, a spiritual dance. Each character, scattering one by one like sparks, and like an abstract painting, is full of malleability – the paper surges full of meaning.

Calligraphy is an art woven of lines and the meanings of the characters. These Chinese characters originated in the Shang dynasty between 1700 and 1046 B.C.. While each letter in the alphabet indicates one sound, each Chinese character has one meaning, and there are well over 100,000 of these ideograms. Chinese characters began reaching Japan in the first century B.C. and have been used for two millennia to write Japanese. In Japan, they are known as *kanji*, “Chinese characters.” The art of calligraphy arrived later, with the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, and developed swiftly. Copying classic texts by

the ancients or highly talented calligraphers became, for example, part of Zen training. By the late ninth century, in the Heian period, *hiragana*, a phonetic script unique to Japan was created to simplify writing Japanese. Calligraphy became regarded as one of Japan's traditional arts, along with the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and the incense ceremony. There are now about seven or eight million practitioners of calligraphy in Japan. The writing implements used in calligraphy are distinctive. The brushes are made of animal hair (from sheep, *tanuki* raccoon dogs, and other sources). *Sumi*, ink, begins by mixing soot generated by burning either wood or oil (sesame, rapeseed, or soybean oil) with glue to form an ink stick. Some ink sticks are four hundred years old. Rubbing the ink stick on an inkstone or *suzuri*, which has a small pool of water at one end creates the smooth glossy liquid ink used in calligraphy. The process of taking time to rub the ink stick and make one's own ink could be said to be a ritual in itself.

Today in our digital world, glyphs of all sorts are mass produced by machine. The glyphs that human beings write are, however, never the same. No two are ever alike. They are thus a tool of communication that captures the vigor, the energy, and even the heart and soul of the individual. Through the swing and graze of Saito's brush and in the distinctive marks that result, the subtleties of the heart are expressed. This work goes beyond writing to become a form of painting.

By offering a demonstration of calligraphy in New York on September 11, Saito wishes to communicate the splendor of uniting without conflict. I believe that her calligraphy transcends language to speak to us, to show us a path by which people can unite.