



Japanese Canadians in the arts

Bryce Kanbara

1. dark clouds of half a century

In 1942, for reasons that have been proven to be racist and opportunistic, Japanese Canadians were forcibly uprooted from their homes on the West Coast of Canada. Over 26,000 people were affected. Families were split apart, sent to internment camps, prisoner of war camps, road work sites, and sugar beet farms. They lost their civil liberties, personal property, buildings, land, their institutions, their communities and ways of life.

When the war ended in 1945, Japanese Canadians were given the choice of living east of the Rockies or being sent to Japan. 4,000 chose to go Japan – in the language of the day, they “repatriated.” In reality, they were deported. Most had never been to Japan, and found themselves in a defeated, war-ravaged country. Japanese Canadians who remained in Canada dispersed widely, with many eventually coming to live in Ontario.

Post-war, most Japanese Canadians downplayed ethnicity. They did not try to establish a “Japantown,” as there had been in Vancouver’s Powell Street district. When they resettled in Eastern cities such as Hamilton and Toronto, they sought homes that were not close to one another as a means of protection against future harms. They did not speak about the 1940s to their children or teach them the Japanese language. They strove to blend in, to de-marginalize themselves, or in another framing, to assimilate.

Japanese Canadians did this with abundant success. According to the 2006 Canadian census, Japanese Canadians had the highest intermarriage rate of any ethnic minority.¹ Japanese Canadians intensely focused on social and economic recovery and advancement. The desire to assimilate with mainstream Canadian society affected the development of Japanese Canadian artists, the art they produced, and how it was perceived by others.

2. rays of light

The heroes of Japanese Canadian art for me are a small number of truly remarkable second-generation *Nisei*² who went against the grain and the odds to pursue art as a way of life. They lived in different parts of the country, and for a long time, were probably unaware of one another. Born in 1926, Kazuo Nakamura, Roy Kiyooka, Takao Tanabe were, to me at least, the triumvirate of senior Japanese Canadian artists. Shizyue Takashima was born in 1928, and Nobuo Kubota in 1932. These five carved out individualized careers as highly esteemed mainstream Canadian visual artists. *Nisei* also made prominent marks in other art fields: the novelist/poet Joy Kogawa (Obasan), architects Raymond Moriyama (the Canadian War Museum, the Ontario Science Centre, the Canadian Embassy in Japan and the Toronto Reference Library, among many other buildings), Eugene Kinoshita (Bank of Montreal in Toronto), and landscape architect George Tanaka are widely recognized models of stellar accomplishment. They were few, they were *Nisei* and they set the bar high. Internment themes came out slowly in the collective body of artwork: Kazuo Nakamura had made watercolour paintings at Tashme internment camp where he spent his early teen years. Much later, when he was living in Toronto, he produced an extended series of pale-green, abstract landscapes based on recollections of a lake he often visited to find solace from life in the camp. The painter, Shizyue Takashima, wrote and illustrated a children's book about her memories titled *A Child in a Prison Camp*. It is to be expected that, as artists, these *Nisei* explored traditional Japanese culture and heritage to some degree, even though their lived influences were not primarily Japanese. They did not speak or write the language well. The cultural connection, however, was significant enough that references appear periodically amid the modernist influences in earlier work and various contemporary currents that flow through their art practices.

¹ Ann Milan, Helene Maheux and Tina Chui, "A portrait of couples in mixed unions," *Statistics Canada: Canadian Social Trends*, April 20, 2010. Catalogue no. 11-008-X (available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11-008-x/2010001/article/11143-eng.pdf?st=P-8sKkff>)

² A series of Japanese terms refer to generations, with respect to the length of time a family has lived in Canada. *Issei* refers to first generation immigrants, *Nisei* to second, *Sansei* to third, and *Yonsei* to fourth generation. The generational label typically is applied paternally, though in contemporary times, some people will identify both maternal and paternal generation if they are different (*Nisei-Sansei*, for example).

3. looking for cherry blossoms

In 2004, I assembled an exhibition of artworks by Japanese Canadian artists titled “Japanning” at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Hamilton, Ontario.³ It was a catchy title. The word was derived from the glossy lacquer from Japan – known as “japan” – which is applied to wood-crafts, from small boxes to furniture. The implication was that “Japanese-ness” could be brushed on as a protective layer, and as visual enhancement of the surfaces. But, I was also implying the integrity of the underlying objects themselves could be “glossed over” or “japanned” for the purpose of curatorial expedience. There were few artists making work that had anything to do with anything Japanese, let alone, things Japanese Canadian. This pointed to a perplexing prospect for anyone preparing an exhibition of artworks by Japanese Canadians.

Later, in the exhibition catalogue for “TransFormal”, an exhibition organized by the Latcham Art Gallery in Stouffville in 2012, I wrote, “Nobuo Kubota, Louise Noguchi, Naomi Yasui and Akira Yoshikawa have distinctive art practices shaped by their individual backgrounds in the milieu of contemporary Canadian art. They taught and worked at public art institutions, and they regularly exhibit their works. They do not identify themselves primarily as Japanese Canadian artists. Sporadically (in the work of Kubota, Noguchi and Yoshikawa), specific references to things Japanese seem to emerge as intuitive impulses. The unanticipated manner in which they appear, or not, suggests the complexity of the role Japanese-ness plays, and obliges us to extend our reading and appreciation of each artist’s body of work.”⁴

Nobuo Kubota’s calligraphic series – columns of inked, Asian-looking writing on paper – feature characters that are, in fact, invented by him. His recent large installation titled “Hokusai Revisited” (a huge construction that filled the gallery) is only tenuously suggestive of the famous Hokusai wave print. For Kubota, Japanese associations are evoked intermittently. When employed, the work is a delightful paradox: references to traditional Japanese culture, set into a whimsically ironic form of cultural appropriation. When Louise Noguchi’s mind turns to her Japanese roots, she does it with surprising drama and directness. Her video pieces accomplish this most effectively when she puts herself front and centre in them - strapped to a revolving wagon- wheel, for example, as a cowboy knife-thrower flings at the negative spaces around her body. Or, wearing a kimono with outstretched arms as a bull whip expert bursts flowers held in her fingers (“Crack”, 2000). Akira Yoshikawa was born in Japan and immigrated to Canada as a young boy. His mother was a *Nisei* and an instructor of ikebana. Yoshikawa’s spare, contemplative works are influenced by Buddhist philosophy, he says, and in them he combines a disciplined understanding of Japanese aesthetics with an equally alert awareness of contemporary art issues. Born a *Yonsei* Naomi Yasui is a generation

³ Artists in the show were: Bud Fujikawa, David Fujino, Sadashi Inuzuka, Gloria Kagawa, Anne Kobayashi, Kimiko Koyanagi, Gene Machida, Naoko Matsubara, Kaz Nakamura, Akemi Nishidera, Louise Noguchi, Tamiko Winter Heather Yamada Akira Yoshikawa.

⁴ Bryce Kanbara, “looking for cherry blossoms,” essay for *TransFormal* exhibition June 14 – July 28, 2012, Latcham Art Centre: Stouffville, Ontario. Available at: <http://www.latchamgallery.ca/?q=exhibitions/transformal>

younger than Noguchi and Yoshikawa and two generations removed from Kubota. Her father is a *Sansei* and her mother of English descent. Yasui's delicately-crafted work stems from her research into the early ceramic industry in Europe. She is only asked about her ancestry when people learn her surname. Her work reflects the inevitable blending, alteration and assimilation of immigrant culture. In the case of Japanese Canadians, this process has happened at an accelerated pace.

4. petals

In 1986, I curated "Shikata ga nai" for Hamilton Artists' Inc. The show was meant to bring attention to the Japanese Canadian Redress campaign by presenting works and thoughts of ten very different artists. The exhibition travelled across Canada. The tour began in Hamilton and ended two years later in Burnaby, just after the successfully negotiated Redress Settlement with the Government of Canada. I asked the artists directly, "What does being Japanese Canadian mean to you?" Their statements in the catalogue revealed the occasional consternation of being artists of Japanese heritage.⁵ Here are some of them:

Louise Noguchi: "Often when I talk about my work, I am told that there is a very oriental or Zen quality to it. Other times, I am told my work has no reflection of my heritage. Sometimes, I am asked further, why do I not address my own heritage?"

Nobuo Kubota's statement was poetic:

"When I was born, I was of the Universe.
When I was five, I was the same as everybody else.
When I was eight, the war started: I was different.
During the war, I was displaced: I was a "Jap."
In my twenties, I was Japanese Canadian. In my thirties, I was Canadian.
At forty, searching for my roots in Japan, I was Japanese.
At fifty-five, looking to see who I am, I know that it has nothing to do with being Japanese, or Canadian...
I was right the first time..."

When I asked Takao Tanabe to take part, he replied "It is not the most thrilling idea, another ethnic grouping... You give no cogent reason for organizing such an exhibition at this time, is there any? Still, the answer is yes, I will send a painting." Tanabe's wry statement was acerbic, reflective of historical and ethnic suppression. He also made an outrageously intriguing rationale for the identity of Japanese Canadians. "Canada," he said, "may be more democratic than the United States. Still it is not free of negative opinions and prejudice. I quote from an old article as a reminder of the kind of attitude that was pervasive when I was growing up. It's no wonder we were disliked:

⁵ All quotations in this section have been taken from the show's catalogue: *Shikata ga nai: Contemporary Art by Japanese Canadians*. Hamilton Artists Inc. Hamilton, ON:1987

*The Japanese are ... 'probably the most compulsive people in the world ethnological museum.' Nineteen basic traits of the compulsive personality are these: 'secretiveness; hiding of emotions and attitudes; perseveration and persistency; conscientiousness; self-righteousness; a tendency to project attitudes; fanaticism; arrogance; touchiness; precision and perfectionism; neatness and ritualistic cleanliness; ceremoniousness; conformity to rule; sadomasochistic behaviour; hypochondriasis; suspiciousness; jealousy and enviousness; pedantry; sentimentality; love of scatological obscenity and anal sexuality.'*⁶

Those observations about the Japanese character structure were made by anthropologist Weston La Barre, in an article published in August 1945 after observation as a 'community analyst' among Japanese Americans in the internment camp in Topaz, Utah. There you are," Tanabe wrote, "it describes me perfectly."

For me, curating exhibitions by Japanese Canadians has been both satisfying (for their feeling of communality), and problematic (in justifying a collective artistic intent). And, because I am interested in Japanese Canadian identity, I have regarded these infrequent group show projects as necessary check-ups on the thinking of artists of Japanese descent.

None of these statements in the "Shikata ga nai" catalogue had anything to do with the work the artists did or presented in the exhibition. But they do provide a glimpse into the social and psychological backgrounds from where the works emerge. The statements reflect sublimated issues of self-identity, and rarely expressed perceptions of the artists themselves as Japanese Canadians. Their comments make us reflect on the loss of identity and community, and then symbolically take on the quality of a restorative act. The statements offer personal perspectives of the works for the viewer to ponder.

5. redress

In the mid 1980s, and into the 1990s when cultural identity and politics were influential themes in contemporary art, Japanese Canadian artists lagged behind largely because of the effects of assimilation and two generations of suppressed ethnic identity. In 1988, however, the Government of Canada Redress settlement included funds which were used for community renewal projects. The 1990s saw a wave of artistic projects and an awakening to the meaningfulness of Japanese Canadian identity to one's art practice. Filmmakers, writers, performers, visual artists began the often painful task of examining

⁶ Weston LaBarre, "Some Observations on Character Structure in the Orient – The Japanese," *Psychiatry*, VII (1945), 319-342. It should be acknowledged that this article was based on a study conducted by the War Relocation Authority, which ran the Japanese American internment camps. The study has been subsequently strongly critiqued as "anthropology in the service of ideology" (see Peter T. Suzuki, "A retrospective analysis of a wartime 'national character,' study", *Dialectical Anthropology* 5, 1 (1980): 33-46), rather than any sort of valid observation about the character of people of Japanese heritage.

what their parents and grandparents had endured, and what had been lost to the succeeding generations of Japanese Canadians. The works they produced were tinged with regret, anger, and a yearning for what might have been. Many of these works are based on personal family history. Montreal filmmaker, Michael Fukushima, made a short, animated film *Minoru: memories of exile* which describes his Canadian-born father's difficulties when his family was shipped to a devastated Japan at the end of the war. Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* is a novel about how post-war trauma simmers in the lives of a Nisei woman and the Japanese Canadians around her in suburban Toronto. Jay Hirabayashi's Vancouver-based Kokoro Dance project, *Rage*, was a stirring butoh-inspired performance based on the historical injustice to Japanese Canadians that toured Canada in several versions.

6. turning Japanese Canadian

Lately, similar to the burst of artists projects after the Redress Settlement, there has been a burst of activity among Japanese Canadian artists who are personally exploring identity, the legacy of their ancestors in this country, and the historical and cultural threads that tie them together and that tie them to Japan – in films, fictional and non-fictional books. They include the increasing contributions of *Ijusha* artists (postwar immigrants from Japan). Additionally, well-established visual artists who have careers and reputations as artists in the mainstream have belatedly turned their focus to things Japanese Canadian and Japanese (artists such as Lillian Michiko Blakey, Heather Yamada, Warren Hoyano, Norman Takeuchi, JoAnne Maikawa, and Barb Gravlin). There are *Yonsei* and *Gosei* and other young artists to whom issues of self and cultural identity seem an integral part of their practices (such as Miya Turnbull, Emma Nishimura, Cindy Mochizuki, Laura Shintani, and Hitoko Okada). What is striking about this new wave of art production is that it is readily discernible as something that may be described as “Japanese Canadian” art. It's an indication, perhaps, that one by one, and two by two Japanese Canadians are coming to terms with the truncated development of the history of their people in Canada, and that artists are at the forefront of exploring and expressing the heart of the matter.

7. embracing

In April 2016 at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, a Japanese Canadian Art and Artists Symposium was held. One of the key recommendations was for the creation of a website directory for Japanese Canadians in the Arts, building on a key publication that had been produced in the 1990s. The project was launched last year, and www.japanesecanadianartists.com is a key way for Japanese Canadian artists of all generations to introduce themselves and their work to one another, and beyond. For Japanese Canadians of my generation, this seems like a radicalization of behaviour and holds the promise for a new communality. It is a sign that Japanese Canadian artists have moved from ambivalence and reticence, to a full and open recognition of what it means to be Japanese Canadian.