

A photograph of a row of cherry blossom trees in full bloom, casting long shadows on a grassy field. The trees are in the foreground and middle ground, with their branches covered in pink blossoms. The ground is covered in green grass and fallen petals. The lighting is soft, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The word "RESPLENDENT" is overlaid in white serif font in the center-right of the image.

RESPLENDENT



RESPLENDENT

LYNNE YAMAMOTO

MARCH 8-APRIL 27, 2003

**MUNSON
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You and I are Cherry Blossom comrades
Blooming in the same garden of our squadron.
Knowing that cherry blossoms soon must fall,
Let us fall bravely for our country.

You and I are Cherry Blossom comrades
Blooming in the same garden of our squadron.
Knowing that we are not blood brothers,
Still nothing can ever divide us.

Though we may fall one by one,
Let us return to Yasukuni Shrine
And meet again as blossoms in the same garden.

From *Cherry Blossom Comrades*, Japanese military song



UNBROKEN BLOSSOMS:
AMBIVALENCE AND BEAUTY IN THE WORK OF LYNNE YAMAMOTO

In Lynne Yamamoto's installation, *Resplendent*, viewers are drawn into an ethereal realm which suggests the paradisaical afterlife imagined by the Japanese soldiers of World War II. The setting of that afterlife is the Shinto shrine of Yasukuni Jinja, a mythic, holy and, in the years following Japan's defeat, increasingly contentious site in Tokyo which houses the spirits of 2.4 million of the nation's war dead since 1853.

Japan's modern emergence as an international military power gained momentum when the emperor system was reinstated with the ascension of Emperor Meiji in 1868. This was galvanized by the adoption of Shinto as a national religion. Under state Shinto, the previously benign spiritual symbols of nature worship practised in local shrines throughout the country, became infused with militaristic fervor. The chrysanthemum, emblem of the divine emperor, and the cherry blossom became potent icons for the Japanese populace governed by an imperialist regime.

Soldiers going off to war believed they would triumph if not perish in glory for their divine ruler and nation, blossoming in fire as they took down their Western enemies like cherry blossoms at the flush of most intense life. They would then fall to their death as ripened blossoms drop from the tree only to bloom again in Yasukuni Shrine where prize cherry blossom trees are cultivated. They were promised a glorious death and a serene afterlife where they would be reunited with other dead soldiers and loved ones.

Japan's military regime fostered an insidious perversion of Japan's spiritual and cultural beliefs. The rarified idea of nature, of beauty in the ephemeral, became equated with wartime destruction and needless sacrifice of lives. *Resplendent* captures the instance in which the exquisite turns mean; the ambivalent moment that pivots on the



head of a pin: tiny faces in the blossoms that flutter like butterflies, escaped yet caught; domes shaped like bombs or torpedo heads but forged from delicate glass; and cherry blossom insignias emblazoned in the glass, crudely flattened motifs lacking the intricacy of the actual blooms.

Immediately upon entering, *Resplendent* steeps viewers in utter beauty. We tread carefully, aware of our own corporeal ungainliness: the hundreds of pinned blossoms that waver the slightest bit as we pass; the smooth blown-glass jars pristinely placed, untouched. We are too human, too alive, too messy; we are not sufficiently at peace for this place. Yet if we step closer to the wall, we glimpse not butterflies but cut-outs, caricatures of blossoms, not of a pure pink hue but tinged with an unnatural orange. We notice the images are digitally produced: the closer we look, the more disturbingly artificial they appear. A subtle perversion of loveliness is being enacted here.

The grafting of soldiers' faces onto each of the blossoms is a literal and graphic representation of how aesthetic and spiritual traditions were exploited for military propaganda. Soldiers were led to believe they would blossom each spring, reincarnated in the spirit of a cherry blossom in Yasukuni Shrine. For viewers, it is an unsettling, uncanny experience viewing the faces of 180¹ soldiers on these walls, all from one particular village in Japan, all perished in war. The faces recur nine times; there are 1,620 blossoms, each pinned by the artist in a laborious, repetitive process that ensured her coming to know each face and its expression: sullen, bespectacled, bemused, bewildered, fearful, passive. One reminded her of her father as a young man — his thick, dark brows and intent demeanor.

These miniaturized portraits possess a strangely endearing and repellent quality, removed in time and place. Each soldier's face seems singular and odd, separated from the faceless mass of the enemy pictured in old wartime newspapers and newsreels. They are exotic yet homely; stately yet cartoonish, and surreal. We step near and feel close to knowing them; we step back and they recede into

¹ The actual number of soldiers' portraits is 163; there were 180 soldiers from this village who perished but no photographs were available for seventeen of them. The artist represents each of the seventeen with a blank space in the middle of a blossom, and like the other portraits, each recurs nine times.



flowery camouflage, merging with the thousand other blossoms pinned by the artist.

Much of Yamamoto's work is created through some form of painstaking labour comprising a repeated empathic action, intended to span a gulf in time, space and understanding of a life lived. In the past, the art has been firmly rooted in family history and particularly in the life story of a grandmother she never knew. Chiyo worked on a plantation in Hawai'i as a laundress for most of her life and drowned herself in an ofuro (a deep Japanese bathtub) after the death of her husband and following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Up until recently, Yamamoto's rich body of work has mined the narratives of the Japanese diaspora in North America, from the arrival of picture brides in Hawai'i to the Pearl Harbor bombing. With *Resplendent*, she has turned to Japan for the first time, contending with its intertwined and complex legacies as both victim and perpetrator in war.

The fourth wall of the installation functions as a kind of linchpin to the work, a glimpse into the artist's process as she created it: a fiery touchstone. It is a photograph that captures a Japanese suicide pilot's plunge into the ocean as he misses his target and falls between two American aircraft carriers. The picture is taken from a book of World War II American military history published in 1958. The suggestible viewer may see in the billows of smoke, a trail of blossoms across the sky as the plane descends, or simply an image of pending destruction.

Kerri Sakamoto

Kerri Sakamoto is a Toronto-based writer. She is the author of the novel *The Electrical Field* which has been published internationally and translated into six languages. Her second novel, *One Hundred Million Hearts* is forthcoming in 2003.

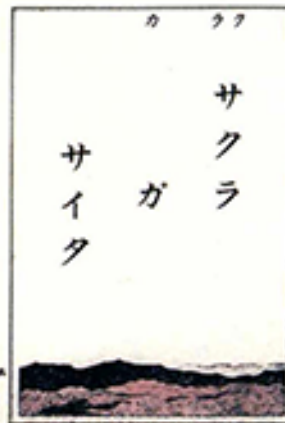






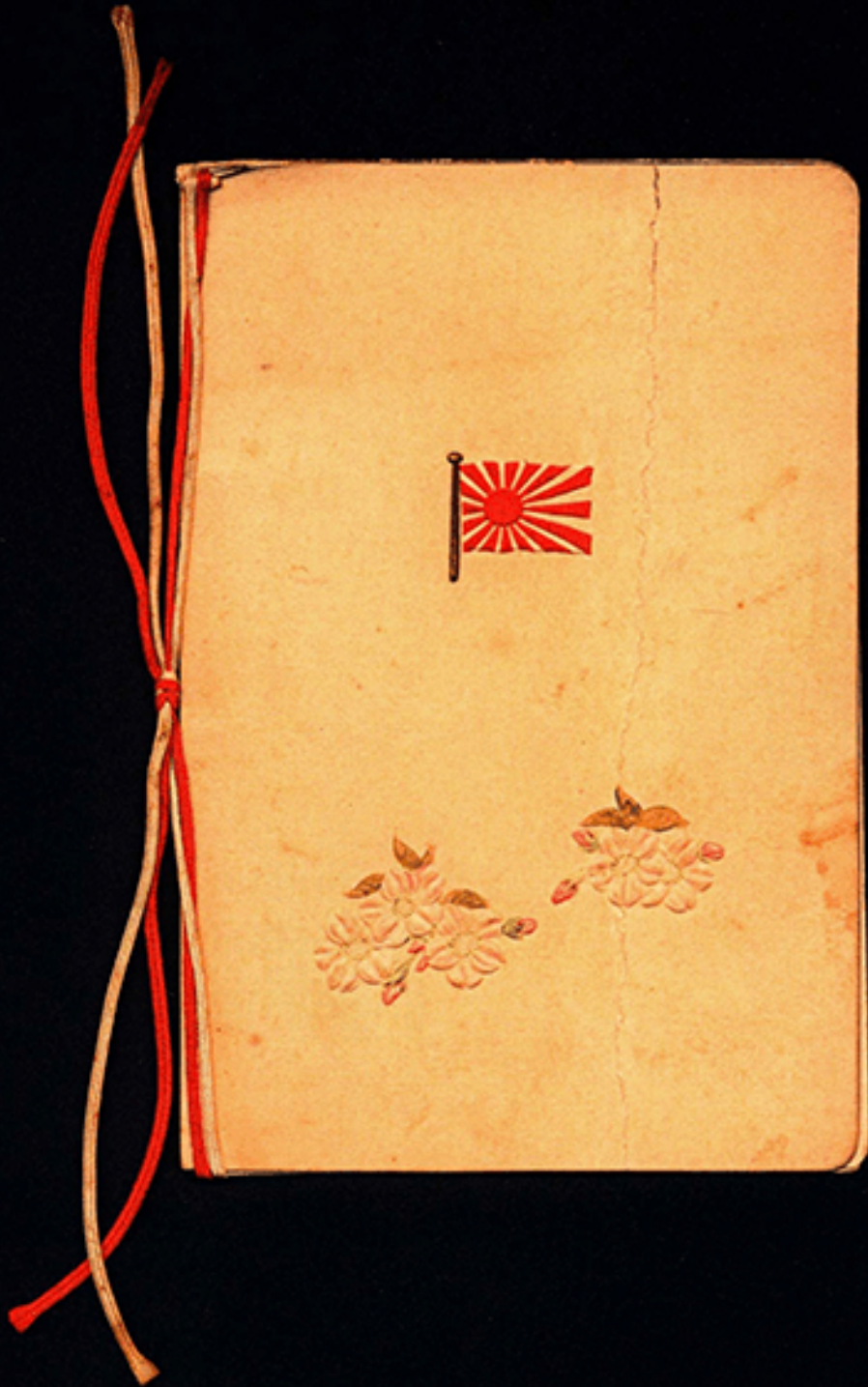


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Still obeying my mother's instructions, I am about to scatter myself over an enemy ship. I am now going to make my long-hoped-for sortie to protect our emperor, with a happy smile over being born a Japanese boy. Wishing for eternal peace and prosperity for Imperial Japan, I will bloom as a cherry blossom at Yasukuni shrine.

May 11, 1945

Jiro Takano, commander of the 8th Cherry Blossom Special Attack Unit of the Divine Thunderbolt Corps

Mother, the Navy is going to kill me.

Chief Petty Officer Masayuki Isobe, Cherry Blossom Special Attack Unit of the Divine Thunderbolt Corps



CREDITS

Cover: video still, *Falling*, 2002

Inside front cover: Students seeing off kamikaze pilots at Chiran Airfield. Hayakawa Hiroshi, May 1945. *A Century of Japanese Photography*, p.359. Photographs © 1971 Japan Photographers Association. Introduction, caption translations and adaptations © 1981 Random House, Inc. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Installation photographs of *RESPLENDENT* (individually blown glass bell jars, hand-cut digital prints, nails, pearlescent paint, bookpage): Adam Reich, p.4; Lucretia Knapp, p.6; Lynne Yamamoto, p.2, p.8, p.10, p.11, p.16

p. 12: Cherry blossom viewing party, including Emperor Meiji (Hirohito's grandfather), Empress Shoken and Crown Prince Haru, with Ladies-in-Waiting at Ueno park. In the background are the personal guards of this Emperor. A wartime (WWII) expression of the role of soldiers was that they were the shields of the Emperor. Print by Utagawa Hiroshige III, May 1881. Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization* (Weatherhill Inc., 1986), plate 21. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Lincoln Kirstein, 1959 (JP 3529). Photograph of print by Otto E. Nelson © 1986 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

p. 13: Translation from right to left:

Blooming, blooming
Cherry blossoms are blooming

Red sun, the morning sun is red
Hinomaru (lit. round sun) flag, *Banzai Banzai*

Pages from a primary school reader for first graders, published in 1933. *Showa-shi Zenkiroku (Chronicle 1926-1989)* (Mainichi Newspaper Co., 1989), p. 70.

p. 14: Cover of menu and entertainment card given to my grandfather, B. K. Yamamoto, for dinner on the H.I.J.M.S. Iwate on July 18, 1927, while it was in port in Honolulu during a Naval Academy Training Cruise. In 1929, my father, Thomas Iwao was named after this ship by his godfather, Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura, when it returned to Honolulu on another training cruise.



p. 15: Covering for the nose of an Oka (Cherry Blossom), or piloted bomb, bearing the cherry blossom emblem. Oka were deployed from 1944 until the end of the war. Photograph taken by the U.S. Army Signal Corps at Kadena Airfield, Okinawa in April, 1945. Courtesy National Archives, photo number SC 248906. Left, a photograph of an entire plane, photo no. SC329443.

p. 16: Prototype of bell jar for *RESPLENDENT*.

p. 17: Hagoromo Society of Kamikaze Divine Thunderbolt Corps Survivors. *The Cherry Blossom Squadrons: Born to Die* (Ohara Publications, 1973), p. 120, 149.

p. 18: Capt. Rikihei Inoguchi and Cdr. Tadashi Nakajima with Roger Pineau. *The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II* (U.S. Naval Institute, 1958), p. 44. Courtesy of United States Naval Institute Photo Archives.

Inside back cover: Kaiten pilots, including Petty Officer Yutaka Yokota (at left), author of the book containing this photograph. Kaiten were human torpedoes, used from 1944 until the end of the war. *The Kaiten Weapon* (Ballantine Books, 1962), p. 128.

THIS EXHIBITION IS
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY
OF RICHARD SUSUMU
YAMAMOTO (1920 - 2002),
A RESEARCH SCIENTIST AT
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OF HEALTH AND WWII
VETERAN (U.S. ARMY 442ND
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LYNNE YAMAMOTO was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai'i, but has lived in New York City since 1989. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. (www.ps1.org/yamamoto)

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Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art



