



LYNNE YAMAMOTO

Recognized for her austere, quiet and contemplative installations, Lynne Yamamoto interweaves complex narratives of memory, family and Japanese American history in her art.

Her oeuvre references her ancestry that is tied to the history of Japanese immigration to Hawai'i, where she was born and raised. Incorporating various poetic symbols, many of her earlier installations examine the life of her grandmother Chiyo, who worked as a laundress on a plantation. Similar to the stories of many other Japanese female immigrants to Hawai'i, Chiyo arrived as a picture bride and faced a life of arduous physical labor. In 1942, at the young age of 49, Chiyo drowned herself in an *ofuro*, a Japanese style bathtub. For many years, this narrative remained the focal point of Yamamoto's work. Although her installations often develop from personal stories constructed around family memories and oral histories, Yamamoto's art addresses larger issues of gender relations, social stratification and colonialism. Subsequently,

the works foreground the conflictual histories rooted in racial and social hierarchies written into Hawai'i's unique multicultural and multiethnic fabric. The sheer power of her art rests in the viewer's dynamic interaction in reading the pieces, pulling back layers to uncover various meanings.

Many of Yamamoto's installations include meticulously handmade components that are often fabricated through a repetitive process such as hand-stitched dollies, hand-cut paper dollis, and hand-cut paper cherry blossoms with images of fallen Japanese soldiers. The painstaking and involved technique of handcrafting each individual piece enhances the sense of intimacy that pervades the installation's atmosphere with the ever-present hand of the artist. Reiteration is not only imperative to Yamamoto's creative process and methodology, it is similarly found

House for Listening to Rain,
2011. Spalding House
Garden, Honolulu Museum
of Art.

Photo courtesy of
Lynne Yamamoto



in many of her aesthetic arrangements. Her installations are often amalgamations of small, multiple elements that are amassed to produce a striking "whole."

Whither House represents a continued departure from Yamamoto's earlier work as she turns toward outdoor architectural structures. It is a culmination of the intersection between family history, memory and architecture, and her interest in "how vernacular architecture speaks of culture and memory."⁵ In 2004, Yamamoto created the photographic series *From Malana'i Place*, documenting the decrepit interiors of abandoned homes in Honolulu, where her father once lived. The now dilapidated and dismal spaces are far cries from the bustling activity and joviality of a loved and lived-in home.

In another series of photographs, Yamamoto moved from documenting interiors to capturing exterior elements. *Passages*, 2007, is comprised of three photographs exploring the "decaying structures of a colonial past."⁶ She photographed the remains of a building in Puna, Hawai'i, and the Grand Hotel and Botanical Garden in Singapore.

Illustrating the artist's interrogation of the convergence of architectural structures, the history of colonialism, and memory, the series occupies a transitional space in her oeuvre that developed into *Chimneys*, 2008. This body of work, which takes the form of both an installation and a book, is comprised of images of one hundred chimneys found in upper middle class areas of O'ahu. Much of Yamamoto's art consciously or unconsciously makes visible the previously invisible. Many people who live in Hawai'i may have never noticed chimneys or questioned their function in the tropical climate of the islands. The visual excursion that renders these chimneys as central subjects is more than a project to depict the beauty inherent in everyday objects. Rather, it foregrounds issues related to class and colonialism in which the peaked roof and chimney are metonyms of status, wealth and a legacy of missionary presence. The organization of the book is telling as the first photograph is the home of Charles Montague Cook, Jr., descendant of one of Hawai'i's most prominent missionary families.

Reflecting on the project, Yamamoto comments:

Once I moved to New England and began to think about the impact of 19th century New England architecture on Hawai'i, the idea of the chimney returned to me. No doubt the conventional chimney came with the missionaries and the pre-fab houses they traveled to Hawai'i with. And they persisted whether or not the climate warranted them, almost as though a house was not a home without a hearth and chimney.⁷

In the installation, photographs of assorted chimneys hang on the walls. Placed on a pedestal in the center of the gallery is a small sculpture of a house made of vitreous china that provides further associations to gentility and upper class status linked to the missionaries who came to Hawai'i. Yamamoto's sculpture, *Jiji's Shed*, produced in the same year, stands in contrast to the architectural design of the chimney house and its loaded connotations.

⁵ Images from *Chimneys*, 2008. Photos courtesy of Lynne Yamamoto

Grandfather's Shed,
2008-2010.

Photo courtesy of
Lynne Yamamoto

Jiji's Shed is a small "shoebox sculpture"⁸ of her grandfather's work area, a modest space constructed from found and scrap materials. As a worker for the Dole pineapple plantation on Lana'i, her grandfather's class status is on the opposite spectrum from that of missionary families such as the Cooks. Yet, for Yamamoto, each structure held unique and endearing qualities that were equally awe-inspiring. She characterizes her grandfather's shed as a "magical place, where he created beautiful things."⁹

The installation *Genteel*, 2010-2011, continues this investigative trajectory into the immigrant history of Yamamoto's family in Hawai'i. Made of distinct elements that are rearranged depending on particular exhibition locations, *Genteel* includes: *Provisions, Post-War*, 2007-2010, vitreous china, wood; *Insect Immigrants, after Zimmerman, (1948)*, 2009-2010, hand embroidery on found doilies; and *Grandfather's Shed*, 2008-2010, hand finished, digitally carved marble from 3D scan of handmade positive. This sculpture is the same form as *Jiji's Shed*, but produced on a larger scale and with different material.

Binaries run throughout *Genteel*. For example, in *Grandfather's Shed*, the ephemeral plantation shack assembled in inexpensive and accessible materials that are easy to tear down and rebuild, is now formed into a hard, thick and durable marble. Immigrant labor and the "dirtying" that occurs through manual work in the plantation fields, yielding muddied work boots and soiled clothes, counter the image of the pure white shed. Yamamoto also plays with the traditional use of marble in sculpture to memorialize and commemorate those holding significant titles and places in history, as exemplified by Roman busts. In *Genteel*, however, the humble shed of her working class grandfather is raised on a pedestal and displayed in the conventional method used by modern museums to exhibit "high" art.

The small scale sculptures and photographs of architectural structures evolved into the 2011 life-sized, site-specific installation in the Spalding House garden of the Honolulu Museum of Art entitled *House for Listening to Rain*. Made from recycled wood, the simplified design of a wooden frame with a corrugated iron roof is reminiscent of her grandfather's shed, plantation workers' homes, and Japanese tea houses. Nestled on the gentle slope of the garden, solid walls are replaced by mesh that allows the viewer to gaze out at the garden, producing the sensation that there is no barrier between the interior structure and the exterior world. The purposefully slanted floor of the shelter leads the visitor's eye naturally out toward the garden. Yet, the viewing



of the garden is only a part of the overall experience of the work. Yamamoto designed the structure to engage the different senses of touch, smell and hearing in addition to sight. The calming pitter-patter of gentle Hawaiian rain on the roof, the smells of the Pacific, and the distinctive scents emerging after rainfall — so comforting and evocative of the islands — are integral to the construction of the installation.

For the Wing Luke Museum installation *Whither House*, Yamamoto once again explores Japanese American history, memory, place and architecture while involving the visitor's multiple senses. Since place is a prominent component of her *oeuvre*, she researched the particular history of Japanese American immigrants on the West Coast. Inspired by the tent houses of Japanese immigrant

farmers in the early 20th century, Yamamoto produced a large-scale version for the exhibition. The work, according to Yamamoto, "speaks of a condition in which one cannot settle or feel rooted in a permanent home. Anti-alien (anti-Japanese in practice) land laws in the 1920s prevented Japanese farmers from owning the land they tilled."¹⁰ The years from 1900 to 1941 marked the peak of Japanese immigrant farming in the U.S. By 1909, over half of the Japanese labor force in the U.S. worked in agriculture and three-quarters of them resided in California.¹¹ The Alien Land Law of 1913 prevented Japanese farmers from purchasing land or leasing it for more than three years, resulting in families being forced to constantly move. This situation of "perpetually cultivating new land and then having to leave just as it became productive made



Markings, 2011. Wentworth Coolidge Mansion, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Photo courtesy of Lynne Yamamoto

financial security an elusive dream."¹² In 1920, a more stringent law stated that "aliens ineligible for citizenship" could not lease land or acquire it through corporations or in the names of their Nisei (American-born) children. Since anti-Asian sentiment was already prevalent in the 19th century, these laws were aimed not only at Japanese but also Chinese immigrants. But, since Japanese were the largest immigrant group working as farmers, many white Americans viewed them as a formidable threat on both U.S. soil and abroad. As overt tensions between the U.S. and Japan continued to escalate during the period between the two world wars, so did anti-Japanese sentiment. Thus, the alien land laws were targeted largely at Japanese. A number of states passed alien land laws including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho,

Louisiana, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. These discriminatory laws were determined to be unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court only in 1952.

Although *Whither House* is not life-sized, it is produced on a significant scale to monumentalize the makeshift accommodations of early immigrants. Such structures evoke a long history at the heart of the Japanese American experience. The tent house rests on wheels to imply mobility and alludes to the uprootedness and migratory nature of the Japanese American farming community. Incorporating salvaged wood for the floor creates a multisensory experience for the viewer, who is not only encouraged to touch the structure, but also to smell the "old house scent" emanating from the floor boards. The familiar smell of "home" permeating

throughout the space, conjures associations with stability, family, and a sense of place, which is at odds with the actual condition of the immigrant farmers whose ability to settle and put down roots was thwarted by exclusionary laws and racist practices.

Whither House is beautifully constructed, monumental and inviting, thoughtfully researched, meaningful, and poetically composed to parallel displacement. Gone are the ephemeral materials and delicate and dainty items each produced with the ever-present hand of the artist, commonly found throughout Yamamoto's oeuvre. Gone are the small individually crafted components combined to create an installation. Gone are the stories of her immediate family. The intimate, personal world of the artist has undergone a metamorphosis into a large, bold construct. Presented in the context of the Pacific Northwest, at this particular museum, Yamamoto could not have chosen a more fitting history to tell in a more poignant and captivating way.

Lynne Yamamoto is an Associate Professor of Art at Smith College in Massachusetts, where she teaches 3D design and installation art. She has had solo exhibitions in New York City, Pittsburgh, Honolulu and Seattle, and has exhibited internationally in Canada, Poland, Denmark and England. Yamamoto also has a public art commission at the Seattle Central Library. Artist residencies include the Lucas Artists Program, Montaivo Arts Center, Arts/Industry Program, Kohler Arts Center, and Blue Mountain Center as well as residencies abroad in Ireland, Canada and the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center residency in Italy. She received her Bachelor's degree in Art from The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington and her Master's in Studio Art from New York University.