

EMMA NISHIMURA

The weight of what cannot be
remembered

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EMMA NISHIMURA: THE WEIGHT OF WHAT CANNOT BE REMEMBERED

BY DR. HEATHER READ

This is a library, of sorts. Rather than stories written on paper and bound into books, this library, by Toronto-based artist Emma Nishimura, captures the fleeting nature of family memories. Nishimura cares for these memories, visually wrapping them like *furoshiki*, a traditional Japanese bundle used to contain food and gifts. The stories here—memories of the experience and effects of the uprooting, exile and internment of 22,000 Japanese Canadians during the Second World War—are sensitive; Nishimura's use of the *furoshiki* underscores a need for caretaking of these narratives and their people.

To understand Nishimura's work, it is important to understand the history she examines. During the Second World War, in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japanese Canadians living within 100 miles of British Columbia's coast were uprooted from their homes by the Canadian government. Approximately 22,000 Japanese Canadians were sent to internment camps in British Columbia, sugar beet farms in Manitoba and Alberta, self-supporting camps, road camps, or prisoner of war camps. During this period, all Japanese Canadians' possessions were destroyed or sold by the government; proceeds from sales helped fund the internment.

The war ended in 1945, but Japanese Canadians could not return to the coast until April 1, 1949. As a result, many Japanese Canadians moved to Eastern Canada following the war, and rebuilt their lives. For most, it was important to try to integrate into the dominant "Canadian" culture of the time, to ensure the events of the internment would never happen again. For subsequent generations, this meant European customs tended to dominate over Japanese ones in the home and use and facility of the Japanese language was mostly lost.¹ In 1988, after a lengthy advocacy campaign by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC), Prime Minister Brian Mulroney issued an apology on behalf of the Canadian government. A financial settlement, known as Redress,



was disbursed. There was substantial artistic activity related to the politics of Redress among Japanese Canadians, as survivors and descendants began publicly exploring memories and history.

Emma Nishimura heard some stories of her family's internment history from her grandparents, parents, and aunt, but was aware that some were not being shared. One contributing factor that led to these silences was active assimilation. Nishimura recalls a family story about her father's first day of kindergarten that exemplifies her grandparents' desire to fit in: "After the first day, the teacher called home and said, 'I can't understand your son.' And so, from that point on, they stopped speaking Japanese in their home."² As in many Japanese Canadian homes, the linguistic silence came with a silence about the internment.

Nishimura's body of work, then, can be seen as an attempt to fill these silences. The first of the two works here, *Collected Narratives*, is a series of etchings in the shape of *furoshiki*. The etchings feature narratives of second-generation Japanese Canadians Frank Moritsugu, Terry Idenouye, Harold Miwa, and Keo Shibatani and third-generation Japanese Canadians Lillian Michiko Blakey, and Kathy Nishimura (Nishimura's aunt). Nishimura's mother, Jeanie Nishimura, is also featured, recounting stories she learned from her in-laws. Emma Nishimura conducts interviews as part of this work and uses transcribed text to form the lines in her detailed etchings. The process involves listening to stories repeatedly, and reading the words for days as she prepares the plates, writing in impossibly tiny text. As the final component of this work, Emma gifts each narrator with an original print.

The second work, *Archive of Rememory*, is a careful arrangement of three-dimensional *furoshiki*, printed with photographs from Nishimura's family

archive. For these pieces, Nishimura, a fourth-generation Japanese Canadian, prints photographs on flax and abaca paper, and ties each photograph around a bundle of sand until the paper dries. Then, Nishimura drains the sand, so while the bundles look solid, like stones, they are actually paper thin. The images are printed at a range of levels of contrast, emphasizing how some memories are rendered clearly in our minds, while others are harder to recall.

Nishimura's pieces can be seen as examples of Japanese Canadian post-memory. Post-memory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the indirect influence of trauma on future generations; she suggests children and grandchildren of survivors are often the ones tasked with sense-making of difficult histories.³ Nishimura is not alone in her explorations of internment post-memory. She works alongside other Japanese Canadian contemporary artists, such as Cindy Mochizuki and Steven Nunoda, who explore Japanese Canadian experiences, as well as non-Japanese Canadian artists such as Gloria Daly, Leslie Hossack, and Michael Kluckner, who consider the way the internment shaped British Columbia. The internment history is also well represented in Canadian theatre, film and literary arts, by creators such as Tetsuro Shigematsu, Chris Hope, and the indomitable Joy Kogawa, among others.⁴

Additionally, political and healing elements are implicit, but important, in Nishimura's work. At a smaller scale, her work parallels art promoting healing in marginalized communities and populations who have experienced trauma, such as the *Walking With Our Sisters* memorial (commemorating murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada) and the *NAMES Project: AIDS Memorial Quilt* (an international art project celebrating lives of people who passed away due to AIDS).⁵ In both these larger pieces and in Nishimura's work, the intention is similar: to create places to contemplate difficult, unknown histories. An abiding question all the aforementioned artists and projects share is one probed by Nishimura here: what are the lingering effects of systemic discrimination on individual lives? It is proving to be a vital question in our increasingly multicultural world.

Images

Front Cover: *An Archive of Rememory: Matsuoka Family Portrait, Japan 1931*, 2017, photogravure on flax and abaca paper, 3" x 3" x 2.5".

Interior: *Collected Stories: Harold Miwa* (detail), 2017, etching and hand painting on gampi with wax, 17" x 22".

Artist Bio

EMMA NISHIMURA

Emma Nishimura is a Toronto based artist, whose art practice ranges from traditional etchings and papermaking, to installations. She received her MFA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and her BA from the University of Guelph. Emma's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is in public and private collections. Recent exhibitions include: MacLaren Art Centre (ON), Biennale Internationale du Lin de Portneuf (QE), Constellation Studios (NE), California Institute of Integral Studies (CA), Beijing Taimiao Art Gallery (China). Emma currently teaches at OCAD University, the University of Guelph and Sheridan College.

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Author Bio

DR. HEATHER READ

Dr. Heather Read is currently the Rebanks Postdoctoral Fellow in Canadian Decorative Arts. At the ROM, she works to broaden known stories about the Canadian Decorative Arts Collection, and explore how Canadian diversity – both geographic and cultural – can be represented and understood through objects.

Prior to this position, Heather was Postdoctoral Fellow for the Landscapes of Injustice Project (www.landscapesofinjustice.com), a SSHRC Partnership Project exploring the forced sale of Japanese Canadian property during the Second World War. She worked with the Oral History cluster, interviewing Japanese Canadians who experienced internment, and their families.

Heather has worked in culture and heritage across Canada, from Newfoundland and Labrador, to Yukon. She has published in both the academic and public sector, including Studio Magazine, the Newfoundland Quarterly, and Material Culture Review. She holds a doctorate in Adult Education and Community Development from OISE-University of Toronto, and a Master's degree in Folklore from Memorial University.

¹ Sugiman, Pamela H. "Memories of Internment: Narrating Japanese Canadian Women's Life Stories." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2004, pp. 359–388, doi:10.1353/cjs.2004.0049.

² Nishimura, Emma, and Heather Read. "Landscapes of Injustice Interview." 24 Sept. 2015.

³ Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

⁴ For more information about the diversity of artistic practice in the Japanese Canadian community, please see: <http://japanesecanadianartists.com/>.

²⁵ Anderson, Stephanie G. "Stitching through Silence: Walking With Our Sisters, Honoring the Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada." *Textile*, vol. 14, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 84–97, doi:10.1080/14759756.2016.1142765; "Critical Inquiry." *Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1993, pp. 752–779, www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/448696.

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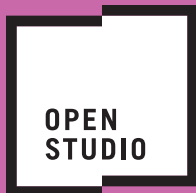
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