

Special Thanks to:

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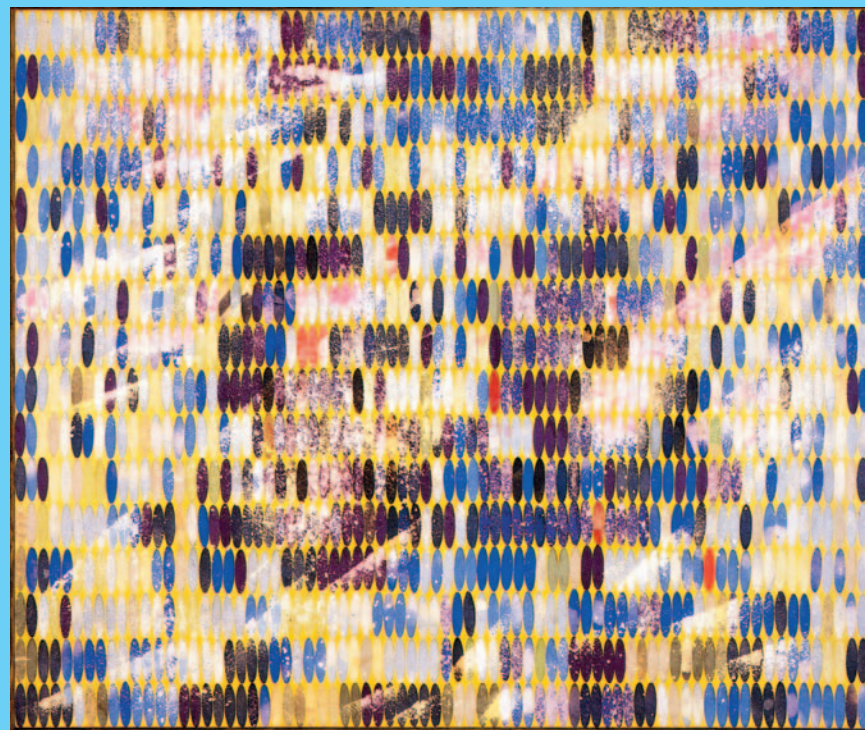


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Persistent Light:

Eugenia Sumiye Okoshi and George Mukai
August 3 – September 21, 2007



Asian/Pacific/American Institute, NYU
7th Floor Gallery, Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, NYU

Persistent Light: Eugenia Sumiye Okoshi and George Mukai

Eugenia Sumiye Okoshi was born in Seattle, WA in 1921 during a family business trip to the U.S. She was raised and educated outside of Tokyo, Japan where she attended the prestigious Rikkyo Jogakuin, Futaba-kojo-Futaba-kai school. As a young woman Okoshi lived through the bombings and destruction of her home and way of life during WWII. She recalls, “Everything was destroyed, destroyed everywhere, people with nothing, nothing to eat, nowhere to live.”

On a train from Tokyo to Nagasaki, Okoshi passed through Hiroshima after the bombing. The military police ordered her to shut the blinds but she peeked through. She saw that there was nothing. Faced with nothing herself, Okoshi decided to leave Japan. She fought authorities to recognize her as an American citizen by birth and came back to Seattle, WA where she began working, studying, and making art with Fay Chang and Nicholas Damascus at Seattle University and Henry Frye at the Modern Art Museum of Seattle. Okoshi also found inspiration in the work of Mark Tobey, another popular Seattle-based artist who incorporated Japanese sumi painting, brush gesture and calligraphy into his Abstract Expressionist paintings.

Okoshi made her way to New York in 1956 where she worked as a beautician by day and spent her nights in her studio in the West Village. She studied with Jacob Lawrence at the New School Painting Workshop and sang in the choir at the Japanese American United Church on 143rd Street, where she met George Mukai. Mukai remembers Okoshi working furiously at her studio any time she could. He was also new to New York, an artist, and

had his own war experience.

Mukai was born in 1919 just outside San Diego. His father struggled against Alien Land Laws that constantly threatened his security as a farmer. After Pearl Harbor, Mukai and his brothers enlisted in the military. The rest of their family was broken up and detained along with 110,000 fellow Japanese Americans in concentration camps across the nation for the duration of the war. Mukai joined the 442nd Regiment, an all Japanese American unit that by the end of the war had received the most decorations and sustained the highest casualties. Because of Mukai's military service, he was allowed to visit his imprisoned family members under supervision.

After the war Mukai attended the Gepson Art Institute in Los Angeles, CA under the G.I. Bill. He grew interested in Realist painting that would “pop” off the canvas. In 1950 he moved to New York where he joined the Art Students League and worked restoring Chinese Antiques in exchange for studio space. During the war Mukai collected material and equipment and assumed that he would paint about his war experience. Once he returned however, Mukai felt that he had experienced the war enough already and did not need to paint it. He focused on still-lives and streetscapes and only painted two versions of one war painting, “In a Twinkling of an Eye” (1973), one exhibited here.

While Mukai was interested in Realism, Okoshi embraced an Abstract aesthetic popular after the war. Asian and Asian American Abstract Expressionists are an often-overlooked part of this international artistic movement. “Sunset of Ruin,” (1960) Okoshi's favorite painting, is representative

of her early work. Drenched in an impenetrable fog inhabited by ghostly scratches, it is at once terrifying and serene. A small patch of red punctuates caked and cracking rectangular forms obscured by wafting blurs of pink, brown, and grey.

In 1976 Okoshi married Mukai. By then she was exhibiting solo shows internationally and was a member of the Westbeth Artists Community in the West Village. Over the course of the 1960's Okoshi had developed a new style and technique that would come to define her work. Okoshi paints with oil on canvas and then places uniform ellipses of washi paper imported from Japan she has cut and colored into a grid on top of the paint. This meticulous and exacting process takes immense amounts of time. This technique is used in two numbered series of paintings entitled *Persistent Light* and *Plenum* that Okoshi has been making for decades.

The *Persistent Light* and *Plenum* series evoke rain spattering on a window with an almost pixilated effect. Like in her earlier work recognizable forms appear to be just beyond sight. They emerge like the shadows of ruins through the smoke of a bombed out city. Yet they also evoke a calm bustle — an eerily mundane optimism. Light and color still find us through a settling screen of dust. This is not enduring light, able to withstand pressure, pain, or obscurity. Instead, Okoshi gives us persistent light: actively striving against obstacles in its way to make its message seen.

Okoshi's pieces engage questions of how parts become wholes and how particles become waves in a natural world we no longer understand as elegant and fully intelligible but perhaps we increasingly

experience as sublime. The urban feel of Okoshi's work plays off this notion as well. The city is abuzz with movement that is dependent upon organization but is subversive of order. The dizzying interconnectivity of urban life is sublime even when in devastating ruin.

Okoshi's ellipses break up their own repetitive grid. They stand as both layered individuals and a seamless flat whole. Plenum means full, and Okoshi is able to show us the fullness of nothingness that is as soothing as it is haunting. She does not let us decide between the opposites and categories we project onto her work. Instead she insists on an alternative based on the ambivalence of lived experience.

Okoshi and Mukai have each inhabited multiple conflicting sides of global armed conflict: Japanese and American, enemy and ally, victor and victim. Their work and their stories resist attempts to carve the world up into “us” and “them.” Okoshi offers a world beyond binary divisions and Mukai shows us the destruction possible “in a twinkling of an eye” when humanity is disregarded as “other.” Rooted in personal experience, these works point to the implications and violence of an either/or fantasy of the world. Together, their experience and the experiences of Japanese, Asian, and Pacific Islander American communities linked together by wars and migrations has required persistence. Recognizing this persistence gives us new ways to see.

Dylan Yeats, curator



George Mukai and Eugenia Sumiye Okoshi

Works consulted:

The 12th JAA Art Exhibition of Japanese and Japanese American Artists in New York. Exhibit guide. New York: Japanese American Association of New York, May 10 – May 26 2007.

Asia/America : Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art with essays by Margo Machida, Vishakha N. Desai, and John Kuo Wei Tchen. Margo Machida, guest curator. New York: Asia Society Galleries: New Press, 1994.

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Sumiye Okoshi. Artist brochure. New York: Viridian Gallery, 1994.

Sumiye Okoshi. Artist Statement. *Japanese Artists Association of New York, Inc. 20th Anniversary Catalogue.* New York: Japanese Artists Association of New York, 1992.

Conversation with Sumiye Okoshi and George Mukai. Daniel H. Inouye and Dylan Yeats, May 3, 2007.

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