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## Reflecting on the long shadows of history.

Sep 12, 2021

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Agata Popęda



**Agata Popęda here, reflecting on 80-year-long shadows of history.**

**An American friend asked me what I am writing about this week and I said:** The concentration camps that Japanese-Americans were sent to during World War II, and art rooted in that experience.

**Specifically, I was referring to the “Shadows from the Past” exhibit,** which features the work of eight Japanese-American artists and is currently on display at the Monterey Museum of Art—and on the cover of this week’s print edition of the *Weekly*.

**“I think the term is ‘internment’ camps,” he corrected me, without bad intention.** It was a correction that made sense because English is my second-language and I absorbed American history from books, not from ancestors or family anecdotes that provide for *real* understanding of things.

**After this exchange, I went back to the booklet that accompanies the exhibit** and includes introductory statements from artists Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, Reiko Fujii, Lucien Kubo, Wendy Maruyama, Tom Nakashima, Na Omi, Judy Shintani, Masako Takahashi, Jerry Takigawa and the exhibit’s curator Gail Enns.

**The term “concentration camps” is found in an opening quote**—“Concentration camps occur when a government in power removes a minority group from the general population—and the rest of society lets it happen,” it says, in a statement attributed to [Densho.org](https://densho.org), a grassroots organization dedicated to sharing the story of World War II-era incarceration of Japanese-Americans. In other words, the exhibit doesn’t hesitate to recognize the events of 1942-1946 for what they were, and name them by their proper names. I shouldn’t either.

**In the winter of 1942, two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor**, U.S. Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, sent more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans to concentration camps. They were transported away from their homes and communities and jobs and personal possessions and imprisoned for as many as four years in tar paper barracks in heavily guarded camps throughout the American West.

**In the Monterey Museum of Art’s “Shadows” exhibit**, which opened Sept. 9 and runs until Jan. 9, 2022, eight sansei artists (third-generation Japanese immigrants) reflect on this legacy.

**An exhibit about darkness is full of dark colors and dull forms** that speak about the monotony and hopelessness of camp life. And the dark tones are certainly there: In black kimonos (Takahashi) and in black and white photos and symbols of oppression, like cages (Nakashima). What shocks are rosy, floral patterns by Degarrod—*Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls: The Legacy of WWII on my Japanese Peruvian Family*—the only cheerful element and a true ornament of the exhibit.

**I like to think these flowers represent the changing times.** And also, perhaps, that painful or shameful chapters of history must ultimately be faced—if, for now, through art and rosy petals.

## EXCERPT

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