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## Sansei artists emerge from "Shadows from the Past"

February 4, 2021 by [SOJI KASHIWAGI](#), [Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor](#)

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Bay Area artist Na Omi Judy Shintani remembers the day several years ago when her *Nisei* father walked up to a barrack just like the one that once housed him and his family at the Tule Lake, Calif. concentration camp, and in a fit of rage, literally started ripping the wooden boards off the walls "with his bare hands."

For Shintani, it was a shocking moment. "I never saw him express such feeling and anger before," she said.

The Tule Lake barrack, bought after the war by a local farmer near the camp, was being torn down, and the farmer's family permitted Shintani, her father and fellow former incarcerated and their descendants at that year's Tule Lake Pilgrimage to take whatever they wanted, as keepsakes, memories, and for Shintani, as pieces of art.

Using the actual wood from the barrack, and with the help of her father, Shintani created "Pledge

Allegiance," using wooden strips as stripes to create a hanging American flag.

"I named the piece "Pledge of Allegiance" because the idea of "liberty and justice for all" is something my family didn't experience during WWII," she said.

This piece and several others by eight nationally recognized *Sansei* artists can now be seen as part of a newly opened online art exhibit entitled "Shadows from the Past: Sansei Artists and the American Concentration Camps."

Presented by San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, Calif. and the LH Horton Jr Art Gallery, "Shadows from the Past" features the work of Shintani, Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, Reiko Fujii, Lucien Kubo, Wendy Maruyama, Tom Nakashima, Masako Takahashi and Jerry Takigawa.

Curated by Gail Enns of Celadon Arts in Monterey, Calif., the exhibit includes a variety of genres and mediums including painting, sculpture, printmaking, photography, assemblage and fiber arts.

"They demonstrate how contemporary artists have managed their challenging cultural, historical and political place in America," said Enns. "Each artist uniquely contributes something vital to the collective memory and struggles of the Japanese American people and culture as the events of nearly 80 years ago continue to impact their lives today."

At an opening "Meet the Artists" reception held on Zoom on Jan. 21, the artists spoke about the pieces they created and what they meant to them personally.

Takahashi, who used her own hair to create works that connect her to her Japanese heritage, talked about spending a good amount of time not dealing with the fact she was born at the Topaz (Central Utah) concentration camp.

"You really want to move on and look out and beyond," Takahashi said. But when she heard then-President Donald Trump and some of his supporters talk about the wartime incarceration as a precedent that can be repeated again, alarm bells went off.

"We have to keep in mind that so many people may think that this wasn't a bad thing to do," she said.

For Takigawa, a photographer, finding a collection of family photographs from camp after his mother passed away led him to create "Balancing Cultures," a series of pigment prints on rag paper. In one photo, entitled "A Jap's Jap," four young *Nisei* women in camp have several harsh slash marks inserted over their faces and bodies.



"Pledge Allegiance, 2014" Tule Lake Concentration Camp barrack wood, barbed wire, 36h x 30w x 6d photo by Na Omi Judy Shintani

Another photo of *Issei* detainees and the infamous “A Jap” quote from Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt is also included.

Finding these photos and creating this series was a way of finding himself, he said.

“I’ve spent a career trying to find my way of being Japanese,” said Takigawa. “The war left a burden that we carry and it needed to be expressed in some way. Photography is a language, and I wanted to say something with it.”

For Maruyama, creating art is a form of activism that’s needed today.

“The *Nisei* didn’t say much about what happened to them,” she said. “We *Sansei* have more of an ability to speak out. We have to become activists for them, as well as for the future.”



And for several of the artists like Shintani, creating this art has been healing.

“I tell personal stories of injustice in a way that can be transformative to the viewers,” she said. “It’s meant to be healing for myself, my family, my community and my country.”

*The exhibition is partially sponsored by the Stockton chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League, Delta College Cultural Awareness Program and the Delta College Asian and Pacific Islander American Staff Association. To view the exhibit online, visit: <http://gallery.deltacollege.edu>.*

*The Japanese American National Museum will partner with San Joaquin Delta College to present a virtual panel discussion on the exhibit Feb. 18 at 1:30 p.m. PST on the exhibit. More information, including the Zoom link, will be provided.*

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