Sugar/Islands: Finding Okinawa in Hawai‘i—The Art of Laura Kina and Emily Hanako Momohara


On 11 July 2015, amid the fanfare of Okinawa-themed activities, the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Los Angeles opened the first major US art exhibition on Okinawan identity, Sugar/Islands: Finding Okinawa in Hawai‘i—The Art of Laura Kina and Emily Hanako Momohara. A theatre full of Okinawan Americans took part in performances and listened to the panel discussion by the curator Krystal Hauseur and the Emily and Laura are the two artists, who are both mixed-race and American. The exhibition featured paired artworks by the artists that reflected on the stories of their ancestors as migrant labourers and the journeys of Kina and Momohara to search for and reclaim their Okinawan identity, both literally and metaphorically. The artists’ seemingly unrelated visual expressions were juxtaposed to bring to light the yet relatively unspoken Asian and female views about the twentieth-century immigrant labour diaspora and their descendants’ psychological struggles. In Out of Sight, William Hackman writes that “in cultural history (…) the victors are in no small part determined by who writes the history.”1 Rewriting history encounters remarkable resistance. In 2015, I was pleased to review a museum exhibition of artwork dealing with identity by fourth-generation Okinawan American women.

Identity and unspoken histories were the focus of the didactic panels, whereas in the accompanying catalogue Hauseur examines migration and racialization through the artists’ investigations of their family histories.2 Her essay “The Diaspora of Ghostliness” brings attention to the invisibility of the Asian American workforce that has contributed significantly to the success of American capitalism.3 Hauseur writes that the artists call into question the assimilationist narrative that promotes Asian Americans as the model ethnic minority.4 Such claims obscure continued struggles with poverty, discrimination, and “racial melancholia.”5 The dark tonality of the works reflected the

3 Ibid., 8.
4 Ibid., 3.
5 Ibid., 16.
psychological toll of the artists, who noted that they endured growing up feeling not wholly Asian, and whose non-white sides of their families were burdened by the shame surrounding their incarceration as Americans of Japanese heritage during World War II. While Hauseur documents this lesser known history of Asian Americans through their personal family stories, Margo Machida posits the historical and economic significance of strategically located Pacific islands and their people to the US in her essay “Re-Imagining Islands: Asia, America, and the Pacific,” noting that with a growing number of artists from Asia including the Pacific Islands in the Americas, younger generations of Asian American artists like Kina and Momohara have become empowered to uncover their histories.

Okinawa Prefecture in Japan was the Ryukyu Kingdom, which flourished as a bridge to other Asian countries until it was conquered by Satsuma-Han (Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan) in 1609. Forced to assimilate—yet looked down upon by the mainlanders—the Islanders fought bravely as Japanese during World War II. Okinawa then became a strategic base for the American military, which imposes its presence to this day. This postwar Okinawa was the “homeland” that Kina and Momohara visited. The pairing of artworks that stood out was Kina’s *Before the War* (2013) and Momohara’s *Island 1* (2011). Kina painted her grandmother’s cousin whom the Japanese Imperial Army conscripted, as a ghostly blue child with a stern gaze. Tragically, during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, he was forced to commit suicide. The Army, as the story goes, also commanded the Islanders to jump off the cliff instead of being captured alive. From that cliff, Momohara photographed the view—a seemingly infinite, grey cloudy sky hovering over two-thirds of the print, above the ocean waves.

Momohara’s sense of aesthetics and introspective style conceal her exploration of identity as her dominant theme. Her images exhibited a harmonious coexistence of dichotomies—fact and myth, real and constructed, personal and historical, actual and symbolic—serenely reflecting her mixed-race background and coming to terms with her (un)covered ancestral history. After her trip to Okinawa revealed that her family name Momohara was actually

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7 Margo Machida, “Re-Imagining Islands: Asia, America, and the Pacific,” in *Sugar/Islands*, 30–35.


9 Hauseur, 19.