LACMA UNFRAMED

2022 AHAN: Studio Forum Acquisitions
Interviewed by: Jennifer King
December 9, 2022

It's with gratitude and enthusiasm that we announce the Art Here and Now (AHAN): Studio Forum artists of 2022: April Bey, Beatriz Cortez, Kate Mosher Hall, Greg Ito, and Kyungmi Shin.

AHAN: Studio Forum is a group of LACMA supporters who are instrumental in bringing the work of emerging and mid-career artists based in L.A. to the collection. On an annual basis, the curators of the Contemporary Art department organize a series of studio visits open exclusively to AHAN members. They reconvene at a later date for a discussion that leads to the final selection. Below, get to know the AHAN cohort of 2022 and their work through their recent conversations with Rita Gonzalez, Jennifer King, and José Luis Blondet.

Greg Ito

Greg Ito, What Will Remain, 2022, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased by AHAN: Studio Forum with additional funds provided by Jane Siegal, 2022 Art Here and Now

Your recent body of work references your grandparents' incarceration at the Gila River camp in Arizona during World War II. Can you tell me about your grandparents, and their role in your life as a fourth-generation Japanese-American?

My grandparents were the nucleus of our family when they were still alive during my childhood. I would spend so much time at their home (in Crenshaw, then they moved to Culver City) growing up because they would babysit my brother and I when we were little. I never knew anything about their camp experience until I was in first grade when my teacher Mrs. Ikegami invited my grandmother to our class to speak about the incarceration camps. It was one of the first times I felt so proud of my grandparents and what they went through and overcame, and the first time I really felt proud to be Japanese American. I even made a little model of an internment camp with little playdough people in it. I don't think I fully understood what happened and what the Japanese American community went through, but it was important for my family to share this history with my brother and I at a young age. Reflecting back on those years stirs up a lot of complex emotions. I remember it was the first time I learned the terms "jap" and "nip." Kids on the playground used to do the "Chinese, Japanese, Indian Chief" song pulling their eyes back so they would be squinted, and I remember my first fight was because a kid called me a "chink." But after that day my grandmother shared her story, we never talked about it again. Both of my grandparents seemed to have buried their emotions deep down inside, keeping a lot of their experiences to themselves. I think they were just happy living in the present with their family and being the best grandparents they could be without dwelling on the past. A lot of the older generations that went to the camps don't like to talk about their experience, and with so many first- and second-generation Japanese Americans passing away now their stories are fading away with them.

I think artistically my grandparents were a huge influence. My grandfather used to paint signs in his makeshift shop in Crenshaw. I used to see gallons of paint in his little workshop in his backyard and the posters he would paint for family events like my birthdays, and signs for booths at our Japanese community centers obon festival. I think this is why I gravitate to using house paint in my paintings. He also tinkered in his workshop making weird funny sculptures and objects. He was also a cartoonist, and was asked to bring his portfolio to Disney studios but turned down an offer after learning the pay was lower than the white animators. We have some carvings he made during his time in camp that were small gifts for my grandmother. They are some of the most beautiful objects I've ever seen. The carvings are delicate and small renderings of deer and rabbits from Bambi, which was released during the time they were in camp, and intricate inlay work that spelled my grandmother's name Sue, which was short for Sueko. He smoked cigarettes and watched golf all day in his old age and I thought he was so cool.

My grandmother was a seamstress for her own pleasure. She always had a dedicated sewing room in their home, full of machines and clothing she would make for herself. I loved flipping through the patterns and different fabrics she used. We were never allowed to go in the room without shoes because there would be pins stuck in the carpet that would be accidentally dropped while she was working. My brother and I would crawl slowly on the ground looking for needles for her, collecting them on these small Japanese pin cushions. She would tailor our clothes growing up, and her craft lives on in my mom and aunty who are now the family seamstresses. My grandmother was very old school, and I admired her dedication to her craft and passing down the knowledge to her daughters. I think between my grandmother's sewing room and my grandfather's workshops, these were the first "artist studios" I ever encountered.

There's a recurring image vocabulary that appears across many of your paintings. Can you walk me through some of the forms that appear in What Will Remain?

My visual language has been developing over the years using a lexicon of images and symbols that I imbue with my own meanings. In What Will Remain I painted a house, simple in its form, to its basic elements so it operates more as a symbol of home, shelter, safety, and family. A red door is open, which can be both welcoming or a sign that someone left in a hurry. What looks like an ocean is actually a cityscape of twinkling lights representing a larger ecosystem of cultures and communities that we exist within. The sunset clouds are representative of transition. The red sun is a nod toward my Japanese ancestry and a symbol of the passing of time. The poppies are a reflection of my family's lineage of being from California, Los Angeles specifically, and the cycles in life that are mimicked in the seasons. The window frames are from a western origin, simple four-pane windows that operate as portals looking into my world. The flames have multiple meanings one being destruction and loss, and the other as change and renewal. Influenced by California's wildfires, I'm inspired by people who have lost their homes and decide to rebuild on the same land, much like the Japanese American community who lost their homes and businesses in California, but decided to move back after their incarceration to rebuild. Lastly the ginkgo tree is a nod to "family tree." Ginkgo trees are also rooted in Japanese spiritualism and are a medicinal treatment for memory loss. The leaves on the tree are memories, which fade and fall, returning to the earth much like the stories and memories that are lost when older generations pass on.

Given the importance of family narratives in your work, how has becoming a father impacted your art practice?

Becoming a father has changed the family narratives in my work so much. As much as I reflect on the past, having my daughter Spring in my life keeps me looking toward the future. I keep asking myself, with the histories I unpack, what do I want it to inspire within the viewer? While my work is personally inspired by my family's history, it is not necessarily about the internment camps. I want my work to be accessible to all communities because almost every culture has gone through a traumatic experience like the Japanese American camps at some point in history. We all deal with loss, tragedy, trauma, and hate; with that, how do we as people persevere and overcome? From a personal standpoint my work helped navigate me through the pandemic when my partner, Karen [Galloway], was pregnant during the lockdown. I couldn't believe I was bringing a life into such a broken world filled with hate and fear. But looking back at my grandparents' history of being in the camps, falling love there, and leaving to start again and build their family kept me going, and it became ever more present in my practice. I think right now I'm at the turning point in my work as I look to the future for inspiration vs the past and I can thank Spring for this new chapter in my work.