The San Diego Union-Tribune

Artist Greg Ito Explores Family Ancestry at the Institute of Contemporary Art
Written by: Erica Nichols
March 6, 2022

Greg Ito

At Greg Ito's All You Can Carry, you start on a hill and end inside a burnt home. Make your way around large-scale paintings framed in charred wood. From a distance, they are serene landscapes drenched in color; up close, hidden symbols point to themes of trauma, loss, memory, perseverance.

Ito is a master at creating a sense of place. Using paint, sculpture, installation, anything at his fingertips, the Los Angeles–based artist takes your blank space and transforms it into an immersive, artful experience. Apparition, his last solo show at Anat Ebgi Gallery in LA, involved six large-scale paintings, a life-size tiny house, and butterflies—"a very theatrical moment," he says. Now through May 15 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Encinitas, you can step inside his latest realm.

Ito's first San Diego exhibit invites visitors into his family history, centering on his grandparents' experience living in Japanese American concentration camps during World War II. Ito's family still has one of the suitcases they took, filled with photographs and figurines his grandfather carved while in the camps, and some of those items make their way into the exhibit. There are family photographs, burning suitcases, Ito's signature paintings layered with symbols, and installations to cement yourself in the space. It's probably the most personal exhibit he's done, but one that he hopes everyone can find themselves in.

"I want it to be a space of self-reflection," says Ito. "It's a heavy, complex narrative, but it's also beautiful and universal—everyone has gone through hard times, everyone has dealt with tragedy, every culture has had some historical moment that pulls them into a new direction."

He uses symbols to tell that story. There are keyholes that offer glimpses into other worlds, flowers that spark a rebirth, ginkgo leaves to represent memory, little fires behind little houses. Here, fire lives in a dual world, representing both destruction and transformation, a sense of new beginnings.

“There’s always a push and pull between symbolism and their meanings,” Ito says. “Cultural foundations, current times, they meld and morph how we interpret symbols. I’m drawn to simple color layouts and integrating these symbols and images to tell these stories, to express mood and sensation and feeling.”

The experience starts outside, where visitors climb a hill in honor of Ito’s grandfather, whose job at Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona was to stand watch over the hillside water tower. There, visitors can plant seeds at Ito’s first installation, a mix of charcoal and soil, before heading inside to the rest of the exhibit.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s executive order incarcerating Japanese Americans on the West Coast. About 120,000 people were forced to leave their homes behind and pack up only what they could carry to live in camps.

The timing’s not lost on Ito. But he also points to things in his personal life—like his daughter’s first birthday—and to the greater human experience as reasons to start delving into this family narrative through art.

“I look at it as expressing my family’s Japanese American experience as a way of connecting to the larger human experience,” he says. “In the end, we’re all coexisting on this planet together and we’re much more deeply connected than we think.”