

ART ESSAY

FOUR NORTHERN CALIFORNIA ARTISTS: HISAKO HIBI, NORINE NISHIMURA, YONG SOON MIN, AND MIRAN AHN

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Dedicated to Hisako Hibi who died October 25, 1991, at age eighty four.

Recognition of a cultural identity develops in part from an understanding of the community from which it springs. In California, midpoint between Asia and the ideological axis of Western art history (New York/Europe), Asian American women of various communities have recently become visible as Asian Americans and as women artists.

In 1989, Florence Wong and I organized the Asian American Women Artists Association¹ (AAWAA) in northern California in response to the dearth of Asian American women artists at a conference of the Women's Caucus for the Arts in San Francisco that same year. Among the many new friendships formed was the association of younger artists with Hisako Hibi, first-generation Japanese American, or *issei*, whose commitment and work as an artist gave testimony to the long experience of Japanese American women in the visual arts in this country. When Hibi hosted a meeting of the AAWAA at her senior citizen's residence, she was eighty-three years old.

Norine Nishimura, a *sansei*, or third-generation Japanese American, Yong Soon Min, and Miran Ahn, both born in Korea, are contemporaries whose intentions and influences vary; but all draw from strong regional and historical contexts. Min and Ahn, both born in 1953, came to the United States and moved to northern California at distinctly different periods.

Hisako Hibi was born in Japan in 1907 and came to the United States in 1920, remaining here when her family moved back to Japan when she was eighteen. She attended the California School of the Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in 1926 and married artist George Matsusa-

buro Hibi. Her exhibition record includes several in the 1930s and 1940s with artists Elmer Bischoff, David Park, Karl Kasten, and Earle Loran, who have come to represent something of "California painting."²

The now infamous Executive Order 9022 forced the Hibis into internment camps, first in Tanforan, California, and then in Topaz, Utah. They left their paintings with an artist friend, as Hibi recalled, to "give to the community."³ In camp, the Hibis, with Chiura Obata and other artists, formed an art school and taught many of the internees to paint.⁴

After the war, Hisako and George Hibi moved with their two young children to New York, but in 1947 George Hibi died. Even as Hisako Hibi labored as a single mother, and a seamstress in a distressingly hostile environment, she continued to paint and took various classes at night. One of Hibi's favorites was taught by the postimpressionist Victor D'Amico at the Museum of Modern Art. Hibi recalled that he exhorted her to make her "own statement," but she "didn't understand what that meant" and found it difficult to do; she thought it might be like creating a "child's mind, [to] go back to nothingness."⁵ Her Meiji era (nineteenth century) upbringing, with its emphasis on total obedience, conditioned her to censor her "own statement."

Hibi returned to northern California in 1954 and after her daughter graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, worked as a housekeeper for Marcelle Labaudt, a patron of the arts and director of the Lucien Labaudt gallery, a germinal venue for the visual arts in the 1950s in San Francisco.⁶ She was provided with a studio in the Labaudt garage and a room where she lived until 1985, at which point she moved into a senior citizen's home. Hibi did not abandon painting even in her "six-mat" room, although it was much more difficult without a studio and because she was ill with cancer.

In her long career as a painter, Hibi's themes evolved from figuration, landscapes, and portraits of internment camp life and her life in New York, to explorations in abstraction and interpretations of spiritual realities. For Hibi, D'Amico's "make your own statement" meant moving from European traditional models to more classical Asian ones. Her late work is in layers developed from a Buddhist understanding of life as a transparent, ephemeral voyage to be lived with compassion and modesty. In the 1980s Hibi was honored by the San Francisco Art Commission with its Annual Award in Painting and later by the San Francisco Women Artists Association.⁷

In "Compassion," (fig. 1) Hibi sought to paint compassion with a thousand hands. Buddha's palms are pressed together in a prayerful uni-

versal symbol, and a lightness emanates from his spirit rising from a lotus flower. Although the theme is traditional, this painting uses contemporary visual terms; the transparent layers are postmodern deconstructions of technological society subverted by a spiritual contextualization. The layers reveal the worlds inhabited by Hisako Hibi, constructed from her memories and devotions.

In "Springtime" (fig. 2) there are fragments of poems to spring written in Japanese, repeated mantralike here and there, as numerous buds open in the spring with light, energetic motions. The painting marks are just those done when the brush barely touches the paper, light to the surface as the sound of buds opening is to the ear. The painting is infused with a spirit of spring; the movements, the words, the symbols, the space, and the colors evoke the breath of spring.

For Hisako Hibi, art had a profound meaning: "This life is transitory/ Time to bloom, time to fall/ as Spring comes and goes/ art continues in timeless time."⁸ She had discovered light that extended beyond the borders of her painting. When we went to interview her and inquired at her door, "How are you?" she responded simply, "I'm happy."

Norine Nishimura was born in 1952 and lived in Los Angeles at a time of outright hostility to Japanese Americans. She reacted self-destructively to racism and the oppression of early exclusion. When she was nine, she became deaf and blind.⁹ For one year she didn't speak or write and couldn't hear; she could only grunt and had to be led around. She internalized racist harassments and did not speak of them to her mother; she could neither hear, see, nor speak of the violence being done to her.

Later, Nishimura attended California State University at San Jose, majoring in speech pathology and ideology of language and speech. In 1975 she started teaching elementary school in Albany, California (where she still teaches). She took a printmaking class with master printer Kurosaki in Berkeley and from 1980 to 1983 spent two years in Japan to study with him. This was the only formal art education that Nishimura has had and it differs from the other artists presented in this essay in that it was not obtained in the United States.

Besides technique, *sensei* (teacher) Kurosaki taught Nishimura how to "live art," a lesson she has adapted to meet her need for personal expression. "The art I'm doing, it's helping me through all the hard times I've had. It gives me self-identity," she has said.

Nishimura's woodblocks are a tour de force of technical bravado combined with a contemporary, multicultural, and urban energy. She manages to be subtle and direct at the same time, playfully embossing toy war

planes, chain link fences, and guns in her prints. The finality and formal rigidity of standard woodblock technique is pushed aside gently with Nishimura's insistence upon spontaneity, unassuming spatial candor, and multilayered references.

"Goodbye Joe" (fig. 3) refers to Nishimura's father, Joe (whose name evokes the now-ubiquitous G.I. Joe), as he left Manzanar before the rest of his family to attend school. "Joe" is ex'd out where the 0 forms a target with handprints splayed alongside and within the shadow of cut strokes, an ironic reference to Asian calligraphy. Hovering in and out are tracings, rubbings, and drawings of a chain link fence (which encircled the camps).

"Untitled and Precise" (fig. 4) is a large mural of four prints. Created in response to the recent Gulf War, the print includes negative and positive shadows of warheads and bomber planes, recalling the awful redundancy of the large numbers of bombs launched by the United States in its attack on Iraq. Television coverage of the war made use of arrows showing the war "game strategy." Trails of blood splatters contrast a diagram of a skeleton within the messy parameters of death.

Teaching young children is a way for Nishimura to intersect historical and current social issues with her art. She uses potent political themes, such as the case of imprisoned American Indian leader Leonard Peltier, human rights, and Columbus, for community murals and to elaborate on the children's history stories.

Currently Nishimura is working on large-scale assemblages made of paper bags with full-sized silhouettes of children, re-creating events in her life taken from scraps of her own memories. She has been discovering her multiethnic, multiracial Oakland community and incorporating its materials and people in this way. The ongoing work is a series of testaments to her memories and to injustices suffered by many. Her visual autobiography will be a timeline reinstating the political nature of personal narrative.

Yong Soon Min was born in Korea and came to the United States when she was seven years old. As a young child, her life was ruptured from its tradition-bound history and laced into the eclectic fabric of society in the United States, in Monterey, California, in the 1960s.

As a "1.5 generation Korean American" (born in Korea, but brought up largely in the United States, unlike Korean Americans who are born and grow up in this country), Min has been struggling with the contrast between values rooted in a strong Asian family and those of U.S. life. "[The family] is a really nice strong base, but on the other hand, it was

hard for me to reconcile all that I was experiencing outside the home and home. . . . I've sort of maintained a separation mentally and emotionally and that's one of the reasons I have a hard time explaining to my parents what I'm doing."¹⁰ For Min, a major source of tension is the pull of family against the emphasis on individuality which is so much a part of U.S. culture and accentuated especially for artists.

Min attended the University of California, Berkeley, for her undergraduate and graduate degrees in art and was influenced there by access to the Pacific Film Archive, as well as film theory, feminist theory, and the narrative work of her Korean American classmate, the late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Min was further stimulated in these interests when she participated in the Whitney program in New York. After teaching print-making in Ohio for three years, Min moved to New York where she began to deal with the complex interactions of her birth and childhood in Korea, adulthood in the states, political camaraderie, global travel, art theory, and art practice.

In "Half Home," a major installation in New York, Min addresses the question of "how much of me is Korean, how much has changed, or how much is Americanized and feeling sort of half of both realities, a foot in here, a foot in there . . . ; a superficial aspect of getting back to one's culture can really be akin to being a tourist in your own culture." Min challenges commonly held notions of "home" with her own contradictory relation to "heartland" (whose heart? whose land?), "memory," "mother/tongue" (language), "history," and "real estate" (the real state of conflict is about land). She emphatically turns "otherness" around to challenge the viewer at the same time evoking her own marginality: you are the "other," you cannot assume centrality, you must grope for your place.

Min's work "deCOLONIZATION" (fig. 5) at the Bronx Museum in 1991 brings together specificities of Korean colonization, such as Christianity and oppression of women, and generalized concepts of global colonialism in fragments of poetry, quotes from Frantz Fanon, artifacts, the Gulf War, and postcards. Yong Soon Min's semiotic meditations lengthen the gown of her identity, the *hanbok*,¹¹ on which is written in Korean and English the poem, "To us, already,/ a birthplace is/ no longer our home./ The place we were brought up is not either./ Our history, rushing to us/ Through fields and hills, is our home. . . ."

In "Whirl War," (fig. 6) Min's installation at the Jamaica Art Center, New York, she fuses war with love, south (Korea) with north, and colonial oppression with the Third World. "HALF THE WORLD KNOWS NOT/ HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES" is proclaimed across mas-

sive whirls, black on white and white on black on the wall; "to live to love to live to love. . ." is written in Korean and English on the floor.

In seeking to embrace the world, Min also encounters fragmentation of her own hybrid state, coinciding and colliding with postmodern theory.

Miran Ahn is the same age as Yong Soon Min and also was born in Korea. Because of the oppressed condition of women there, she despaired of a future in Korea and came to the United States in 1973 when she was twenty years old.

Ahn went to school at the San Francisco Art Institute, developing her distinctive autobiographical style, and was early recognized for her painting achievements. A vibrant colorist as well as an extravagant storyteller, Ahn's work was accepted into prestigious San Francisco galleries, and she received the coveted Eureka Fellowship.

Ahn's life is marked by her efforts to help her family and other, unrelated people. She worked to bring her entire family here from Korea while attending school and painting. She married and built her home and studio in Berkeley, California. Yet, although others are the subject of her life, she is the subject of her paintings. It is her fears and hopes, her interactions with others, that fill her canvases.

Her life, encoded in her dreams, weaves in and out of her paintings; sometimes prophetic, at other times of material that has haunted her since childhood. One such is "Monsters," (fig. 7) a depiction of a recurring nightmare she had. Ahn is a young child looking at her prone and vulnerable mother as she is stretched out under a canopy. Her mother is apparently being made ready for sacrifice and is surrounded by old and mysterious men with knives and swords ready to dismember her. This scene terrified Ahn as she was growing up. By painting it, however, she was finally able to exorcise the power of that memory.

In "Baby Chickens" (fig. 8), Ahn services her anxieties about losing some of those she wants to save. The baby chickens have no chance for survival in the dangerous and inhospitable environment: the ice floes are cracking even as Ahn attempts to gather the chicks in a basket to carry them to the far-off mountains. Ahn's mountains are a refuge and not, as in classical European painting, "hideous."¹² In fact, they are the goal and the refuge. She cannot possibly save all the chickens, but she can save some and she bravely sets out to do so, her own vulnerability forgotten even in this impossible situation.

Ahn says of her reliance on dreams, "I am the participant and the observer at the same time, both in my dreams and in my paintings. Sometimes people think it is hard to be that way, but to me it is natural, especially in my dreams."¹³

CONCLUSION

There is a powerful insistence on the recognition of Asian women's antecedents in the works of these four women artists. Antecedents include mothers, grandmothers, sisters, children, home, language, spirituality, dreams, food, and self, and they point to a location of strength and energy. Art is the means by which these women have placed many of these complex associations into active motion and made them visible.

The development of these connections in relation to place helps to locate the depth and breadth of Asian American cultural community practice. Finally, we look, we start to see each other, where we are, whence we came.

In her book on new art in a multicultural America, Lucy Lippard notes that "even for the displaced, the exiled, and the disoriented whose moorings have been cut loose, landing of some kind is necessary. . . . The dialectic between place and change is the creative crossroads."¹⁴

It is the building of hearth.

NOTES

1. Art historian Moira Roth of Mills College, Oakland, California, was also helpful with the organization.
2. Interview with Hisako Hibi at her residence in San Francisco, 15 Mar. 1990, by Betty Kano and Elaine Kim.
3. Ibid.
4. Telephone interview with Robert Hanamura, San Francisco, 13 Nov. 1991.
5. Interview with Hisako Hibi.
6. Telephone interview with Michael Bell, San Francisco, 7 Nov. 1991.
7. Telephone interview with Jo Hanson, San Francisco, 11 Nov. 1991.
8. "Artist Hibi Dies at Eighty-Four: Known for Camp Scenes," *Hokubei Mainichi* (San Francisco), 29 Oct. 1991, 1.
9. Most of the information on Norine Nishimura is from a telephone interview with the artist, Oakland, 24 Nov. 1991.
10. Interview with Yong Soon Min, Brooklyn, N.Y., 23 Feb. 1992, by Betty Kano and Sharon Mizota. Interview conducted during research as a Fellow with the Rockefeller Foundation, Asian/American Center, Queens College.
11. Korean traditional dress.
12. See Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 77, for detailed discussions of European conceptions of nature as seen in paintings.
13. From an unpublished paper on Miran Ahn based on an interview and written by Min Peak, 1989.
14. Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 148-49.



Fig. 1. Hisako Hibi, "Compassion," 1980. Oil on canvas, 39 x 32 inches.



Fig. 2. Hisako Hibi, "Spring Time," 1980. Oil on canvas, 21 x 24 inches.



Fig. 3. Norine Nishimura, "Goodbye Joe (Manzanar 1942)," 1991. Woodcut, soft-ground, 25 3/4 x 22 1/4 inches. Photo credit: Gary Sinick.

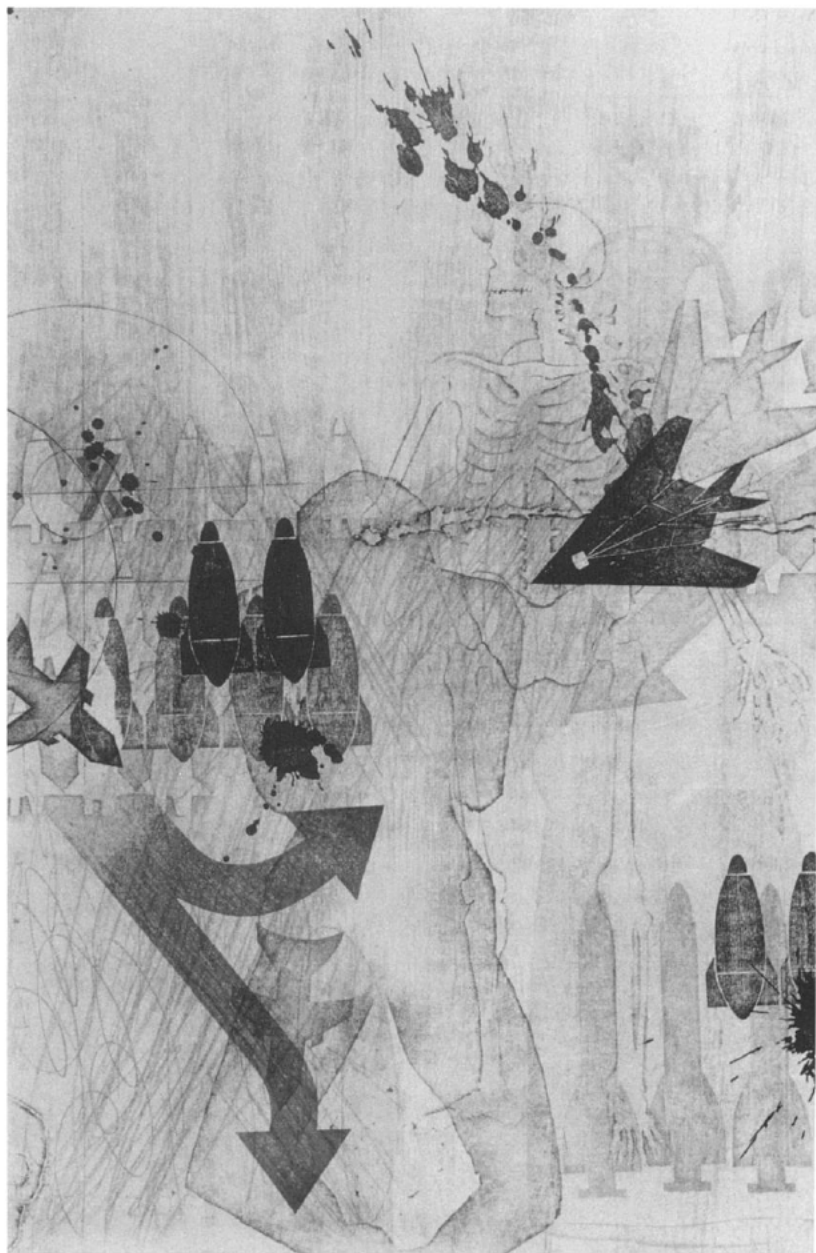


Fig. 4. Norine Nishimura, "Untitled and Precise" (detail), 1991. Woodcut, 38 1/2 x 100 inches. Photo credit: Gary Sinick.



Fig. 5. Yong Soon Min, "deColonization," 1991. Installation.



Fig. 6. Yong Soon Min, "Whirl War," 1987. Installation.

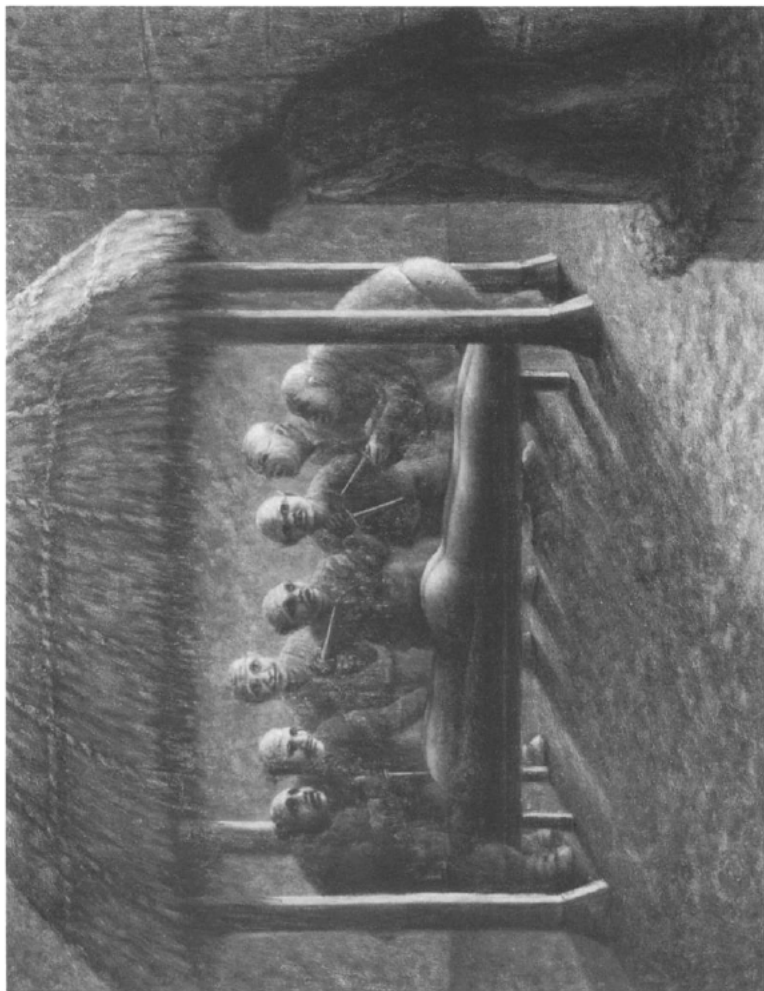


Fig. 7. Miran Ahn, "Monsters," 1983. Oil on canvas, 55 1 / 8 x 72 inches.



Fig. 8. Miran Ahn, "Baby Chickens," 1988. Oil on canvas, 76 x 72 inches.