

Apologies, Memory and Witchcraft ( Akio Takamori, Lauren Iida, Marita Dingus)

Susan Noyes Platt, Culture Column Leschi News April 2017

“Artists are like raindrops—each one. You have to recognize this as the natural role of impacting society through art.” Akio Takamori

I begin by honoring ceramic artist and long time University of Washington Professor Akio Takamori. Takamori died this January but he continued to work right up to his last day. Takamori expanded the boundaries of ceramics through his sense of humor, his political engagement, and his technical virtuosity. His final show “Apology/Remorse” at the James Harris Gallery included ceramic sculptures and ink drawings of public figures apologizing, most famously Willy Brandt at the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto when he simply knelt in silence. Takamori has dressed him in a Japanese kimono.

Apparently, he got the idea for a series of works on this theme when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan publicly apologized for Japan’s acts during World War II. Akio also found photographs of a Japanese CEO apologizing in a deep bow to his employees.

How do we read these images? Are they honoring people for apologizing, exposing hypocrisy, or speaking from the artist’s heart. Perhaps all three. I think of Georgia McDade’s poem about the futility of apologizing. There is certainly an air of absurdity in the deep bow of the CEO, the formal gesture giving nothing to its audience but a public statement. But perhaps the theme resonated at the end of his own life (about which he certainly had nothing to apologize). There might be many interpretations.

Other works in the exhibition featured classical Venus figures with the head of a Japanese man, a timely disruption of expectations of what beauty and sexual identity signify.

Takamori was born in Japan in 1950, during the US occupation of Japan, and came here as an adult. He studied ceramics at Alfred University, the top school for ceramics in the country. His figurative work, both small and large, mix humor, irony, and technical virtuosity. You can see one group of his figures outside Whole Foods in Seattle.

We will miss him. We need his quirky humor and defiance of expectations more than ever today.

“My interest is humanity,” he told the *The News Tribune* of Tacoma in 2006. “That doesn’t change, even over a thousand years. Everyone from a 2-year-old to an old man still has love, compassion, appreciates beauty.”

Lauren Iida “How to Trap a Memory” Art Exchange Gallery March 2 – April 29, 2017

Lauren Iida’s grandparents were detained during World War II at Tule Lake. As a Japanese American, this personal history has profoundly affected her art and her view of the world. Some of her work has been based on photographs from that time. She works in paper cut out. which she described to me as a meditative process. Her current exhibition includes a series of stunning works, complex and filled with imagery, that include both symbolism and specific references from her life. Her story suggests her deep feeling for those who struggle to survive, but she doesn’t just feel concern, she collaborates with people who might seem to have no way forward to help them create viable lives.

lida stopped in Cambodia in 2008 on her way to Thailand, but stayed because at that time Thailand was unsafe for tourists. But she immediately became involved through friends there in helping garbage scavengers, bringing them food and emergency aid. Then she began a business with women who had been trafficked or exploited in low wage jobs. She designed a line of women's clothing and taught the women how to sew the designs that she then sold to tourists. They all lived together in a "slummy" neighborhood as she described it. The business supported all of them for four years. That gives you an idea of what kind of person she is.

Fast forward to now and she is translating children's books into Khmer to help children to read and learn English. She also plans to translate children's books into a local minority language in a rural area of Cambodia.

In the midst of these activities, she returned to Cornish College of the Arts to complete a degree; we can see evidence of her academic training in her figurative work. But cut out paper has more affiliation with Asia than with European art traditions. Her installation at Art Exchange Gallery until April 29 includes a net that hangs over our heads filled with symbols that represent her memories and her beliefs, as well as references to Cambodian culture. My favorite piece is "Hold On" that refers to the clothing business. A woman in the foreground hold a dress against an intricately detailed white cut out ground filled with garments.

Marita Dingus "The Gathering," Traver Gallery March 2 – April 2, 2017

Marita Dingus, incredible transformer of thrown away trash into luminous art, filled a room with a family of almost life size somber, burdened people in her recent exhibition at Traver Gallery. In the center of the circle is Nkondi, a threatening African spirit that can harm other people. This spirit at the center of the circle is a tangle of reddish copper and other materials of that hue. Could this be a reference to our new President as a Nkondi? I think so. The evil that he spreads corresponds to the way that Nkondi works: part of the Congolese witchcraft tradition that enlists spiritual forces in order to harm others. The exhibition also included many of her small figures, but none seemed joyful. We are in trying times. If you want to see Marita's joyful phase go to the Douglass Truth Library and view her giant copper babies flying across the wall.