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"Racism is About All of Us":

Roger Shimomura's "Stereotypes and Admonitions" Exhibition,
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Reviewed by Susan N. Platt

No one escapes in Roger Shimomura's "Stereotypes and Admonitions," an exhibition of 30 medium-sized paintings that tell us about just a few of the racist incidents he experienced as a middle class, third generation American of Japanese descent. (See http://www.gregkucera.com/shimomura_stereotypes.htm.)

For white middle class art world types who like to think racism is mainly someone else's problem, Shimomura gives us "Passe," the brilliantly rendered portrait of elegant art committee types who dismiss his proposal for a representation based on America as a tossed salad rather than a melting pot, because it is "Passe."

For seniors, there is the umbrella-wielding little old lady in "Remember Pearl Harbor" who yells, "You Japs ought to go back to where you came from!"



White academics can identify with the mild-faced white college administrator who asks for "the IDs of those two characters" when Shimomura and Edgar Heap of Birds, the eminent Native American artist, try to obtain a signature for a paycheck.

Then there are the department store clerks who refuse him credit because they don't give credit to Native Americans.

Fran, the Southern teacher with the limpid handshake, declares, "Well I guess my name sounds as weird to you as yours does to me."

Right next to all of these well-bred middle class racists, Shimomura includes horrifying racial incidents that have been featured in the news, such as the murders of Lilly Wong and Vincent Chen, and recently developed racial products, like GhettoPoly and Abercrombie and Fitch t-shirts with slogans like "Buddha Bash." Yes, there is also a pick up truck driver and a maintenance worker, a politician and a policeman and, of course, football teams and a college student gang, so we can point at them and think yes, of course, them, not us. But then again, there are three pieces about



college art teaching and art history itself. Finally, there are the personal experiences that Roger has had while dating, jogging, going on vacation, mowing lawns, etc. These are activities that all of us do without a thought, and in their ordinariness these paintings really hit home. Every minute of every day racism is there to deal with for people of color.

Shimomura's courage is formidable. So many artists in his position could have just gone on with his great success as a tenured college professor, internationally renowned artist, and brilliant painter of pop art style canvases. But he has chosen to speak out, to confront us, and to declare these experiences. How many times throughout his life has he remained silent and/or frightened in the face of insults, ignorance, assumptions, and stupidity.

In these paintings he speaks succinctly and directly. But he also laughs. He draws on racist caricatures that project white fears, but he can also adroitly reinvest them with panache. The smiling "Oriental" professor with a black suit and pink shirt dashingy teaches a Japanese geisha girl art student.

Shimomura has achieved a perfect balance of content and aesthetics, of technique and message. His brilliant flat colors and black outlines appear to be simplified. They are, in fact, extraordinarily complex. The particular tone of color or the curve of the line often, in itself, signifies racism. Comic books and *Ukiyo e* Japanese prints are part of Shimomura's original inspiration, but now those styles tell a more important story. Shimomura has been refining this approach his entire career. His previous series, "An American Diary," based on his grandmother's journal and the experience of the Japanese Internment Camps from 1941-44, distilled color and line and also paired image and text. (See http://www.gregkucera.com/shimomura_diary.htm.) But that series, important as it is, now seems merely a prelude to "Stereotypes and Admonitions." "Stereotypes and Admonitions" is not just about historical racism or Shimomura's childhood memories. It is about the artist's entire life; it is about all of us.



Shimomura's central place in American art is clear in the work titled "History of Art." Against a background of a perfect recreation of a Roy Lichtenstein brushstroke painting (itself an insider joke about abstract expressionism), Shimomura represents himself as an artist who looks like a Kabuki actor. The text states that the editor of a book to be published on the History of Art declared him

a contemporary Japanese painter rather than an American painter. Anyone who teaches art history knows how racist textbooks remain. Token inclusion does not change the fact that the tossed salad of American art still appears in texts as mainly iceberg lettuce.



Shimomura's work rips off conceits and shows all of us who we are and what we do. It is no surprise that he is only a year away from retirement. It takes a lifetime and a great deal of stature

for an artist who speaks of racism as forcefully as this to be seen and, perhaps, even heard by a white art community who still apparently believe that they are not part of the problem.

Image Credits: 1. "Remember Pearl Harbor", 2003; acrylic on canvas. 2. "Ghettopoly", 2003; acrylic on canvas. 3 & 4. "The History of Art", 2003. Version 1 and Version 2; acrylic on canvas.