Remembering as Resistance: The "Shaman" and the "Fox" in the Art of Tomiyama Taeko

Rebecca JENNISON

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Takemura Kazuko

In the days and hours leading up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, a small handful of journalists in the U.S. continued to raise doubts and voice dissenting opinions about the advisability and legality of moving unilaterally along the path toward war. On March 16th, 2003, one such journalist, Bill Moyers, ended his program with the words, "Now, there is nothing left for us to do, except remember it." A little over a month earlier, on February 5th, a replica of Picasso’s Guernica had been draped at the U.N. just before Colin Powell held a press conference there. It is somehow not surprising that in the "visual regime" being instituted in support of U.S. military aggression, an artist’s portrayal of civilian casualties in war would have to be censored. Also not surprisingly, in the weeks following the initial bombardments which began on March 18, images of the real Iraq; civilians injured or killed in the bombings were censored. By the last week in April, after the most overt military operations had ended, one British reporter predicted that "Iraq will stay in the news, perhaps two more weeks." So how can we, as Moyers implores, "remember it"? How can the untold stories of the victims of war be heard and reclaimed as a part of the history of this moment?

It is at this moment, when the questions of remembering and representing war are once again of critical concern, that I am attempting to write about the work of Tomiyama Taeko. While the cultural and historical context of Tomiyama’s work cannot be simplistically compared to those of the present day, it is important to note at the outset that Tomiyama is an artist who has devoted her career to seeking artistic means to represent the "untold" stories of the victims of colonization and war in East Asia.

In "Exhibiting On and Off the Margins: The Making of the Artist Tomiyama Taeko and her Exhibitions," Hagiwara Hiroko argues that it is precisely because of the "issue-based" nature of Tomiyama’s work that the artist’s career has taken shape on the margins of the established art world. Hagiwara highlights the artist’s strategies of showing and circulating work through the creation of "alternative spaces outside established circuits of showing, reviewing and reproducing art." As part of an ongoing feminist project to resist modernist definitions of art and artists as separate from ideologies and social constraints, Hagiwara explores the "social positioning of Tomiyama’s art and exhibiting practices," tracing Tomiyama’s work from her participation in the postwar Jiyu (Liberal)Art Association and the Yomiuri Independent Exhibiton, to the formation of Hidane Kobo and innovative collaborations to produce multi-media slide presentations from the 1970’s, to the exhibition titled, "Silenced by History," which was held at the Tama Art University Museum in 1995.

In June, 2002, thanks to the support of Kyoto Seika University’s Gallery Fleur, a large body of Tomiyama’s work was shown in an exhibition titled Miko to Kitsune: Tomiyama Taeko Ten (The Shaman and the Fox: an Exhibition of Tomiyama Taeko’s Work). This exhibition provided an opportunity for further reflection on the representational and "narrative" practices at work in the art. As the title itself suggests, one theme of the exhibit was the exploration of two aspects of the artist’s stance as reflected in the work. In addition, the design and layout of the exhibit--more specifically, the use of the spaces on the first and second floors of the gallery to display works which the artist associates with "illusion" and "reality"--highlighted yet another aspect of the work. Finally, the use of computers as part of the display made it possible for the first time to show computer-adapted versions of the multi-media slide works which have become Tomiyama’s trademark, alongside the original oil paintings and prints.

During the many hours of discussion that went into the preparation and planning of the exhibit, Tomiyama repeatedly used the phrase, "narrative art" to describe her work. As the details of the design plan for the exhibition evolved, the artist’s aim to remember and narrate, or "re-narrate" the history of the 20th century, gave shape to the display itself.

On the first floor of the gallery, two completed series of works, an installation and the beginnings of a new series of collages were exhibited. Oil paintings and prints from "The Fox Series," completed in 1999, were given the most prominent staging, along with an installation using handmade paper, lanterns, masks and Promeva flowers from New Guinea, titled "A Dedication to the Comfort Women."

In the rear gallery on the first floor, paintings and collages from the series, "The Thai Girl Who Never Returned Home," was shown along with several prints in which the figures of Korean women or shamans appear prominently. Finally, three collage works from Tomiyama’s new series, "The Sea Road," were displayed.

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The artist’s imagination with the metaphorical figures of the shaman and the fox, and a realm of "illusions," the predominantly black and white works displayed on the second floor exemplify the notion of the artist as "witness" to the geopolitical events in three regions and at three different times in East Asian history: the Chikusho mining region in Kyushu in the 1950’s, the Kwangju Uprising of May, 1980, and the Manchurian Railway station in Harbin from the early 20th century to the 1930’s. While the varied range of styles and themes might have given some viewers pause, making them wonder if this could all be the work of one artist, the five series of works exhibited together give us a sense of the breadth and depth of Tomiya’s concerns as an artist. Viewed as a whole, the exhibit begins to take on the larger dimensions of Tomiya’s visual and narrative articulation – as an artist – of an alternative history of the 20th century. One scholar has explained this project in terms of the formulation of a "culture of memory," as follows:

Tomiya’s work will show new approaches in art towards a culture of memory, and stand for a new appraisal of history and the opening towards Asia/Korea which have been characteristic of Japan since the 1990’s. Tomiya’s work can contribute to a new culture of memory which traces exchanges along the roads between Japan and East Asia as well as between Asia and Europe. Her topics relate to internationalization and the conflicts and tensions of Japan’s history in Asia.

With this view of the work in mind, it might be possible to think of Tomiya Taeko’s art as a precursor to, and in some sense a continuum with, more recent projects by artists and curators who are creating spaces at the intersection of discourses on the representation of war history, visual arts and diasporic communities. Tomiya’s work might also be viewed in relation to more recent work by transnational feminist theorists, artists and activists who are defining the space of remembering as a space of resistance to all forms of state violence, including war.

For example, in her response to Drucilla Cornell’s lecture on the subject on the possibilities of a "feminist imagination," Takemura Kazuko highlights the question of memory and mourning as acts of resistance, acts which may open up the possibility of "re-imagining the other." She argues that through mourning, we may be able to bring the dead “into social life,” and that such mourning may be “totally subversive of society in terms of its defiance against the norms by which whose lives should count, and whose should not count, is determined.” Women’s public mourning for the other or “the enemy” is a form of resistance to disrupt the rigid dichotomy of in/out, we/they, or friend/foe.

My reading of Tomiya’s work will resonate with this notion of remembering and mourning as acts of resistance. It is at this provocative intersection between memory, reclaimed as part of historical and visual production, and interventions made by visual artists in the narration of nations that I would like to look more closely at some of the work shown in the exhibition held at Gallery Fleur last year. In the limited space here, I will focus on both autobiographical and visual texts in an attempt to shed light on Tomiya’s representational strategies of intervention into public memory and discourse on history. This is part of a larger project through which I hope to show how the artist’s feminist strategies for representing the untold stories of “others” have shifted during the post-Ampo decades, and as we enter the 21st century and a new era of war and empire. After looking briefly at Tomiya’s use of the miko or shaman figure in work of the 80’s and 90’s, I will discuss works in the “fox series” completed in the 90’s, along with details from the multi-media slide work “The Fox Story.”

In “Ghost Town—The Closing of the Coal Mines,” (Illustration 1) one of the dozens of collages produced by Tomiya for the collaborative project, “The Fox and the Mines,” we see the dark-robed figure of a woman standing in what might be the entryway to a mine shaft. Two hands press inward from either side, perhaps pointing to the figure, perhaps signalling the closing of this gateway. In “Ghost Town,” of the same series, (Illustration 2) a swirling, cloud-like shape formed by mixing oil and water in the print process, hovers over the reproduction of one of Motohashi Seicho’s photographs of the miners’ long-houses taken as part of a documentary photo project in the 1950’s. On the left side of the landscape, we again see the figure of the dark-robed woman, standing there as if witnessing this moment, now lost in the past. This image of the dark-robed female figure appeared with increasing frequency in Tomiya’s lithographs of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Though reminiscent of both Korean folk art and some of the images of women seen in the work of Kathe Kollwitz, Hagiwara suggests that the figure in its varied forms is a representation of Korean women, “peddling vegetables, working in cooperation with each other, mourning their children’s deaths, standing still, roaring with laughter, and shouting out, demanding humane treatment.”

In autobiographical narratives by the artist, it is her memory of, and strong sense of connection to Korea which is often cited as the catalyst which led her to begin the series of works of the last three or more decades. Both in her autobiography Hajiike Hoseka! (Pop Out Balsam Seed!) and in recent lectures, Tomiya recalls her young Korean classmate in Harbin Girls’ School who insisted on keeping her Korean name in the face of strong pressure enforced by regulations to change her name to a Japanese one. She also recalls her journey from Harbin down through the Korean Peninsula in 1939, on her way to Tokyo to study art. The violent treatment of a young Korean by Japanese soldiers left a strong impression on her. Both memories were revisited in the 1970’s when the artist returned to South
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Korea to learn more about the imprisonment of poet Kim Chi Ha and to visit the Suh brothers who were also imprisoned at that time. It was on this return journey to Korea in the post-war era, when she was reunited with her childhood friend and also witnessed violent military brutality (this time at the hands of the U.S. backed South Korean dictatorship); and it was her encounter with Kim’s poetry which inspired her to “make art into an agent of change, change for human liberation, by breaking through national boundaries, by disturbing the division between professionals and non-professionals and removing walls between genres.”

As this example shows, Tomiyama’s narrative accounts of her life, and the process of becoming an artist, are intertwined with that which the art narrates—nation, history and memory. In such narratives, this process is described as a gendered, as well as a political one. It may be out of this complex interaction between personal and geo-political histories that the figure of the shaman in Tomiyama’s work has evolved to become both a medium and a witness for the untold stories of those who suffered and died in the war.

In Tomiyama’s 1986 work, “A Memory of the Sea,” the shaman is a principle figure in the narrative in which a Korean woman asks “Spirit Miko” to search for her sister who was taken away during the war and forced into sexual slavery as a “military comfort woman.” The shaman also appears in a somewhat different form and context in the paintings and collages of the late 1980’s (exhibited in Gallery Fleur as the series, ‘Let’s Go To Japan’) which became the multi-media slide work, “The Thai Girl Who Never Returned Home.” Here, the shaman is witness to events in the life of a young Thai woman, Noi, who becomes a victim of the so-called sex-trade in contemporary Japan and Southeast Asia.

It was after the completion of these series of works in the 1980’s and 90’s that Tomiyama herself began to reflect on the figure of the shaman discussed here in relation to that of the fox which will be discussed in the next section. In an excerpt from a recent artist’s statement, Tomiyama writes:

Like the wandering minstrels of the past, we who have witnessed the 20th century must narrate the memories that are etched in our hearts. At times I am a shaman who listens to the voices of the dead, and at times I transform into the fox and practice deceptive tricks. Between fantasy and reality, I continue to look closely at the history of East Asia and possibilities for my art.

Here, Tomiyama reveals that the metaphorical figures of the shaman and the fox are also references to her own vantage point as artist.

In another recent interview by the artist, Tomiyama explains the complexities of these positions in somewhat greater detail:
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In another recent interview by the artist, Tomiyama explains the complexities of these positions in somewhat greater detail:
I am seeking a medium or metaphor that might link the world of painting and the real world. For example, the series I worked on in the 1980’s which dealt with Korean conscripted laborers and women drafted for sexual slavery by the Japanese military, I used the mediating image of the shaman who links the living and the dead, the present and the past. While in the world of illusion, the mutan or shaman gives voice to the "han" or deep resentment and sorrow of the victims. I think of the mutan figure as existing separate from the state or ethnicity."  

As Tomiyama herself suggests here, the shaman is a medium who links past and present, the living and the dead; to borrow Takanura’s phrase, this act of remembering and telling becomes a disruptive act of resistance which calls into question the dichotomies of us/them, and in/out in the context of nation-states at war. It is interesting that in her search for a representational strategy or vantage point as an artist, Tomiyama adopted the shaman as a gendered figure, but one existing "separately from state or ethnicity." Tomiyama imagines the shaman as a figure that is of a less material and time-bound realm than that in which modern states exist. This may also be partly because of the ambiguity of her own identity in relation to this figure of the Korean shaman. At the same time, this figure, who becomes a medium for listening to the dead, and a "stand-in for the artist" is posited precisely in order to critique the narration of the nation, by mourning those whose voices and very lives have been erased from public memory, and excluded from official history. But as Hagiwara also points out, in the discursive context of the 90’s, a shift was occurring in the representational politics around the history of "military comfort women," and the artist may have felt that the metaphorical figure of the shaman was no longer suitable for the expression of the complexity of positions in relation to gender, nation and history. As Hagiwara writes,

The philanthropic gaze is the first to be avoided and she is of the other whom she is portraying and yet she is not of them. Tomiyama is working within a paradox, conscious that While she sympathized with Korean women (as one of the oppressed), as a Japanese, she cannot easily sing the same song together with the oppressed in Korea. Tomiyama’s Korean women reject our direct identification with them as the oppressed, and yet they do include an occasional smile that seems to invoke a sort of solidarity. It is Japanese woman’s double-sided position as an aggressor/victim that is examined by the artist.  

By the early 1990’s, former military comfort women, led by Kim Haksun, had spoken out and were pursuing Japanese state responsibility for the military comfort women system. In a context which was quickly shifting, Tomiyama began to seek new directions and new metaphors that would suit the new context. This is when she made the decision to return to an examination of her own personal memories, "as a Japanese." It was a return journey to Harbin in the early 1990’s which eventually led to the paintings in "The Fox Series." In reflecting on the significance of this series during our preparations for last year’s exhibit at Gallery Fleur, the artist spoke of a new understanding of her work as a whole: it was the formative years in Harbin which had shaped her consciousness in such a way that drew her to the themes she depicted in the 60’s and 70’s, and so it was to "this beginning" that she would ultimately need to return. Of this important return journey to Harbin, Tomiyama writes,

It takes a very long time for history to reveal itself. Yes, I would go to Harbin. I would learn what it was that I had seen with the eyes of my youth. In late March, 1992, I looked out upon the scenes of early spring from the window of the old Manchurian Railway train heading for Harbin. It was not the wild prairies of the old days, but had changed to a rural landscape of carefully cultivated fields and windbreak forests. But beneath this vast land lay many sad lives, now only bones. Each of those lives, holding more suffering than could ever be told, was now a cloth of earth. Through my art, I would create a requiem for these innocent people."  

While the artist would take her sketches and impressions of Harbin back to Japan and would still choose to paint in a figurative style using oils on canvas with the aim of creating a "requiem," she was seeking new elements and images to add to her visual vocabulary that might give expression to memories which reached back more than five decades.

Not long after her return from Harbin, Tomiyama’s friend and colleague of many years, Takahashi Yuji, produced an original musical performance titled, Kizuna (The Fox). Takahashi’s innovative work drew on his research into medieval, Buddhist music, and was part of his own project to create contemporary music derived from indigenous sources. It was then that Tomiyama began to explore the use of the fox in works that would become the "Harbin Series." For Tomiyama, the fox would become a vehicle for the expression of both her personal memories of the Manchurian experience and the ongoing "tricks of the fox" in contemporary Japan. While the shaman in her earlier work had been a medium through which to communicate with the victims of the war, and was imagined by the artist to be outside ethnicity or state, the fox would enable Tomiyama to examine war history from the vantage point of the colonizer. In an interview on the subject, the artist states,

In the more recent Harbin series, I am trying to face the history of the war directly as a Japanese....It struck me that what I saw in former Manchuria—the festive celebrations marking the
I am seeking a medium or metaphor that might link the world of painting and the real world. For example, the series I worked on in the 1980’s which dealt with Korean conscripted laborers and women drafted for sexual slavery by the Japanese military, I used the mediating image of the shaman who links the living and the dead, the present and the past. While in the world of illusion, the mutan or shaman gives voice to the "han" or deep resentment and sorrow of the victims. I think of the mutan figure as existing separate from the state or ethnicity. As Tomiyama herself suggests here, the shaman is a medium who links past and present, the living and the dead; to borrow Takemura’s phrase, this act of remembering and telling becomes a disruptive act of resistance which calls into question the dichotomies of us/them, and in/out in the context of nation-states at war. It is interesting that in her search for a representational strategy or vantage point as an artist, Tomiyama adopted the shaman as a gendered figure, but one existing "separately from state or ethnicity." Tomiyama imagines the shaman as a figure that is of less material and time-bound realm than that in which modern states exist. This may also be partly because of the ambiguity of her own identity in relation to this figure of the Korean shaman. At the same time, this figure, who becomes a medium for listening to the dead, "and a "stand-in for the artist"- is posited precisely in order to critique the narration of the nation, by mourning those whose voices and very lives have been erased from public memory, and excluded from official history. But as Hagiwara also points out, in the discursive context of the 90’s, a shift was occurring in the representational politics around the history of "military comfort women," and the artist may have felt that the metaphorical figure of the shaman was no longer suitable for the expression of the complexity of positions in relation to gender, nation and history. As Hagiwara writes,

The philanthropic gaze is the first to be avoided and she is of the other whom she is portraying and yet she is not of them. Tomiyama is working within a paradox, conscious that while she sympathized with Korean women (as one of the oppressed), as a Japanese, she cannot easily sing the same song together with the oppressed in Korea. Tomiyama’s Korean women reject our direct identification with them as the oppressed, and yet they do include an occasional smile that seems to invoke a savior/optimist solidarity. It is Japanese woman’s double-sided position as an aggressor/victim that is examined by the artist.

By the early 1990’s, former military comfort women, led by Kim Haksun, had spoken out and were pursuing Japanese state responsibility for the military comfort women system. In a context which was quickly shifting, Tomiyama began to seek new directions and new metaphors that would suit the new context. This is when she made the decision to return to an examination of her own personal memories, "as a Japanese." It was a return journey to Harbin in the early 1990’s which eventually led to the paintings in "The Fox Series." In reflecting on the significance of this series during our preparations for last year’s exhibit at Gallery Fleur, the artist spoke of a new understanding of her work as a whole: it was the formative years in Harbin which had shaped her consciousness in such a way that drew her to the themes she depicted in the 60’s and 70’s, and so it was to "this beginning" that she would ultimately need to return. Of this important return journey to Harbin, Tomiyama writes,

It takes a very long time for history to reveal itself. Yes, I would go to Harbin. I would learn what it was that I had seen with the eyes of my youth. In late March, 1992, I looked out upon the scenes of early spring from the window of the old Manchurian Railway train heading for Harbin. It was not the wild prairies of the old days, but had changed to a rural landscape of carefully cultivated fields and windbreak forests. But beneath this vast land lay many sad lives, now only bones. Each of those lives, holding more suffering than could ever be told, was now a cloud of earth. Through my art, I would create a requiem for these innocent people.

While the artist would take her sketches and impressions of Harbin back to Japan and would still choose to paint in a figurative style using oils on canvas with the aim of creating "a requiem," she was seeking new elements and images to add to her visual vocabulary that might give expression to memories which reached back more than five decades.

Not long after her return from Harbin, Tomiyama’s friend and colleague of many years, Takahashi Yuji, produced an original musical performance titled, Kitune (The Fox). Takahashi’s innovative work drew on his research into medieval, Buddhist music, and was part of his own project to create contemporary music derived from indigenous sources. It was then that Tomiyama began to explore the use of the fox in works that would become the "Harbin Series." For Tomiyama, the fox would become a vehicle for the expression of both her personal memories of the Manchurian experience and the ongoing “tricks of the fox” in contemporary Japan. While the shaman in her earlier work had been a medium through which to communicate with the victims of the war, and was imagined by the artist to be outside ethnicity or state, the fox would enable Tomiyama to examine war history from the vantage point of the colonizer. In an interview on the subject, the artist states,

In the more recent Harbin series, I am trying to face the history of the war directly as a Japanese....It struck me that what I saw in former Manchuria—the festive celebrations marking the
"Foundation of Manchuria," of the 1930’s which grew into the Great East Asian War, and then collapsed—could be seen as a whole era of "fox possession." By introducing the fox into these paintings, although it was clearly a world of emptiness, the reality of the times becomes paradoxically apparent.\(^{18}\)

The prints and paintings that comprise the "fox series" were produced over a period of eight years, and can first of all be explained in terms of a time-line beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and ending with metropolitan Japan in the late 1990’s. While the works are rich with visual symbols and suggestive imagery that draw on varied sources, they may also be read in terms of a geographical mapping that reaches from rural Japan in the early part of the 20th century, to Manchuria—more specifically, the capitol of Harbin—the plains of Manchuria and finally to Tokyo. Four serigraphs titled "Karayuki," depict the complex figure of the women from poor rural areas in Japan who migrated to Korea, northern China and Manchuria to work in brothels that served local Chinese as well as the first wave of Japanese workers expanding into Manchuria. For Tomiyama, perhaps this figure represents the double-sided position of Japanese women at the time—both victim and colonizer.\(^{19}\) (Illustration 3a)

This figure of the Karayuki is already shadowed by that of the man in military uniform and the trickster fox (Illustration 3b). Interestingly, the artist reproduces the image in the serigraph, placing it at the center of the oil painting which became the first in a series of six works chronicling the artist’s view of the history of the Japanese expansion into Manchurian. In the first four paintings in the series, the fox is seen flying or floating in the spaces around central images rich in an iconography that represents the artist’s interpretation of this history, ("War and Illusion," "The Spirit of Yamato," "The Foundation of the Manchukuo," and "Instructing Imperial Subjects with the Ideograph, Loyalty"). It is in the last two paintings in the series, “Seeing off a Soldier,” and “Nostalgia for Days Gone By” where the foxes appear as the central figures in the painting. (Illustration 4) The setting of the first of these is a shrine in Japan or in Manchuria, depicting the wedding of one “soldier fox” before he is sent off to the front. What might be a strikingly familiar family wedding portrait is radically altered in the viewer’s mind: the politely posed fox family, even the dog and chickens at their feet, become surreal. The "normal scene" of a soldier being sent off to war, takes on a tone of parody. In “Nostalgia,” we again see what might have been viewed as a scenic depiction of Harbin—except for the figures who appear as foxes, and other clues that this is also an illustration of the complex power relations in a militarized, colonial setting.

It was in the process of preparing to exhibit these works that Tomiyama hit upon the idea of mounting them as though they were scroll, not oil paintings. The artist used cloth and embroidery that had been handed down for several generations; her mother had made them into obis, which the artist used to create mountings for the works. This both adds to their uniqueness and is a reflection of Tomiyama’s search for material means of introducing "indigenous" or non-western elements in her works.

Having found a means of embodying the fox as a character in this narrative drama of history, Tomiyama continued to follow the tricks and movements of the foxes in at least three other large works in oil. The first of these depicts the foxes as "hikagehira" in the period immediately after the war: a procession of foxes marches alongside a row of cherry trees in bloom, against a background of the vast, red plains and eerie red-tinted sky of Manchuria. Abstract cloud-shapes cut across the scene, as if pointing the way to the procession below. The scene is far-removed from any actual visual memory of the artist—Tomiyama herself was in Tokyo at the time, and it is not likely that cherry blossoms would have been in bloom when the war ended.

Tomiyama completed two more large oil paintings, the final works in the series, in 1998. These two paintings titled "Illusions in Cherry Blossoms" and "Illusions in Chrysanthems," are the last in the series. The theme of the foxes proved a rich one for Tomiyama in the 90’s. The works were exhibited three times, and led to the production of two multi-media slide presentations.\(^{28}\) The first of these,
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“Harbin: A Requiem for the 20th Century” was photographed from the works exhibited at Tama Art University, immediately after the exhibit closed. In addition to Takahashi Yuji who composed the music, filmmaker Hara Kazuo collaborated with the artist as photographer. In the resulting series of slides, Hara’s use of special lighting and objects add dramatic impact to the original works. It was only after the completion of the final two paintings, however, that Tomiyama produced the final multi-media slide work—again in collaboration with Takahashi Yuji—titled, “The Fox Story.”

Up to now, I have discussed only the paintings and prints from which Tomiyama produces her multi-media slide works. As others have argued, it is the slide works and Tomiyama’s small, independent workshop, Hidane Kobo, which are critical in understanding the evolution of the artist’s work. Indeed, in the booklet, Slides, both the artist and her collaborators argue that it is through this medium that the most original and important work has been produced. Collaborator and curator Kobayashi Hiromichi has observed that since the 1980’s, Tomiyama has consciously produced paintings that she knows will be deconstructed and reconstructed as “slides.” Knowing that the paintings will never be viewed as a whole, but will be deconstructed into images of details that are then made into “narrative art” as slides, has shaped the artist’s approach to painting. In looking at the transition that occurs from painting to slide, one is reminded of the diverse perspectival views seen in the work of Hieronymous Bosch or in Japanese scroll paintings. Both Kobayashi and Takahashi have noted an evolution, not only in the paintings, but in the style of narration that is created to accompany the visual and musical compositions in their final form as slide presentations. In “The Fox Story,” unlike “A Memory of the Sea,” the narration has been almost entirely eliminated. The artist’s explanatory comments are introduced only as a series of short teleops, which frees the visual images and musical compositions to communicate “without words.” Takahashi explains that the tendency toward sentimentality which characterized some of the earlier slide works has been eliminated and “finally, true collaboration is possible.”

Briefly here, let’s look at the ways in which single framed details, like manga or graphic novels, are used in the “narrative art” of the most recent slide series, “The Fox Story.”

In the opening teleop Tomiyama sets the stage where the viewer will see images of the trickster fox appearing in different guises, times and locations.

The ancient fox still dwells amongst the cherry blossoms and mums
Performing strange feats of metamorphosis
Turbulent times
Confusion in the Realm
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Images of foxes, sailing in steep descent from the billowing cloud of a cherry tree in full bloom (Illustration 5a), are followed by eight slides of details from the painting discussed above, in which the procession of "hikigeshu" marches across the deserted Manchurian plains. (Illustrations 5b, 5c)

Suddenly embodied in time and place, the sad procession is explained by another telop, "Invading other lands, He is defeated." Several frames later, the telops "Tricks by Foxes," and 

No, he only feigns defect
using charms of self-protection

He performs tricks of transformation
signal the metamorphosis of the foxes and their reincarnation in present times. We begin to see details from the large oils, "Illusions in Cherry Blossoms" and "Illusions in Chrysanthemums" which show the neon-lit skyline of Tokyo and contemporary scenes of the foxes in daily life. (Illustrations 5d, 5e, 5f)

In the latter part of the work, Tomiyama again uses details from the two large paintings to juxtapose the affluent life of the present day foxes with the ghosts and spirits of the war—including the shaman and the "comfort women," which come back to haunt them. In the final frames, the artist focuses on the details of figures riding in small boats who come to the glittering land of the foxes, seeking justice. Finally, "The fox is perplexed," and "stands trial" (a reference to the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000), as new winds and waves from lands over the sea. (Illustrations 5g, 5h)

In this slide version of the work, the details of the original oil paintings are used to construct a fantastical narrative in which the foxes meet the ghosts of both victims and militarists, the shamans and the "comfort women" and small boats filled with new Asian immigrants. Completed in 1999, the work epitomizes Tomiyama’s reflections on 20th century history and the artist’s vision of a 21st century where globalization and migration continue amidst specters of the past.

I began this essay with the suggestion that Tomiyama’s work may be read, at least in part, as a project of remembering as resistance. We have seen the artist’s use of the figure of the shaman as a vehicle for remembering and mourning the victims of Japan’s aggressions in Asia, and her more recent revisiting of the history of the 20th century seen through the figure of the trickster fox. Tomiyama’s work, in retrospect, marks what for the artist are “defining moments,” both in her personal history and in the history of the 20th century: from the opening of the Manchurian Railway and foundation of Manchukuo, to the closing of the coal mines in Kyushu resulting from the shift from coal to oil, the
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Kwangju uprising, and the challenge to public memory made by former military comfort women. The art becomes a series of sites on a large map of the 20th century, urging those who engage with it not to forget.

This attempt to present Tomiyama’s work within the larger frame of the creation of a culture of memory and resistance, may suggest further areas of concern and inquiry. The shifting of the artist’s vantage point between that of the “shaman” and the “fox,” might be examined more closely in terms of the notions of inter- and intra subjectivity outlined by Takemura Kazuko in "Identity Ethics." Following on the work of Yoshikuni Igarashi whose interesting study Bodies of Memory examines a variety of narratives of war in postwar Japanese culture, a closer look at the relationship between Tomiyama’s work and a wider range of cultural representations in the post-Aampo decades might also be fruitful. As Igarashi suggests in his citation of Homi Bhabha, the various forms of "re-membering" are not only about the past, but are also part of an effort "to make sense of the trauma of the present."[2] Thus, further readings of Tomiyama’s work should be less determined by the artist’s own narratives of the past which might suggest the restoration of an "original" or authentic memory of the experiences of the war, and might look in greater detail at the contemporary discursive context.

Entering a new decade and millennium, Tomiyama has now begun a new series of works called "The Sea Road." As the artist continues to create paintings that will be deconstructed and reshaped to form a graphic narrative as multi-media slide presentation, she is now working with a new vehicle or image, that of the puppet. While drawing on the traditional theatrical form which also allows for new parodic and playful interpretations (the Chinese characters may be pronounced either as kagutsu or kairai, the latter also being the term used in kairei seiken, or puppet government), the artist is creating an undersea stage where voices and memories of the sea will again be performed. While the final form which this work-in-progress will take is still uncertain, the artist, now in her early 80’s, continues to pursue the creation of an art of remembering as resistance.

Endnotes

1. This paper is a revised version of two presentations on the work of Tomiyama Taeko. The first was made in August, 2002, at a conference on "Changing Japanese Identity in Multi-Cultural Canada," held at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. The second was presented at a colloquium at the Critical Asian Studies Project, University of Washington, in February 2003.

2. CNN world news, April 27, 2003. (6:30AM)


4. A more careful analysis of the relationship between the thematic chronologies in Tomiyama’s work may be fruitful. It is interesting to note that the most recent works deal with themes that reach back farthest in 20th century history.

5. Ilse Lens, proposal for the "Culture of Memory" project, 2003.

6. Among recent exhibition and publishing projects are Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of Imperial Dream, Yong Soon Min’s DMZ Xing, and an exhibition of works on the Vietnam war, "A Different War." Scholarly works on the subject include, Perilous Memories (ed. Lisa Yoneyama, Fujitani Tak, 2001), Tangled Memories (Marita Sturken, 1997) and Bodies of Memory, (Igarashi Yoshikuni, 2000)


12. Tomiyama’s autobiography chronicles the beginnings of her career as an artist, a career which continually took her “out of the bounds” prescribed for her gender and profession at the time. She left women’s art school to find inspiration in the proletarian art movement, and chose single motherhood rather than the conflicts that would be faced by a woman artist in a conventional marriage and family. In accounts of her girlhood in Harbin, she also reflects on her position as the daughter of a colonialist, in a colonial era: “I was the daughter of a pseudo-westerner, employed by the British, working for them in a lesser status, assimilating their values and exploiting other Asians.”
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7. In the wake of 9/11, several feminist theorists have made vitally important statements affirming the need for all diverse forms of transnational feminist intervention as protest against state violence. Several have pointed to the ongoing and growing “Women in Black” movement as a powerful and performative form of resistance through remembering. See, Inderpal Grewal et al, “Transnational Feminist Perspectives against War” (Professors for Peace website: http://www.action-tank.org/ftp, Oct, 15, 2001); Joan Scott, “Feminist Re Venezuela,” Berkshire conference Keynote Speech, June 7, 2002); Judith Butler, “Explanation and Exotication, or What We Can Hear;” Professors for Peace website, Dec 2, 2001); and Drucilla Cornell, (2003).


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Remembering as Resistance: The "Shaman" and the "Fox" in the Art of Tomiyama Taeko

14. Tomiyama Taeko, artist’s statement, 2001
15. Tomiyama Taeko (1998), p. 68
18. Tomiyama Taeko (1998), p. 68
20. Exhibitions were held at Tama Art University, Liberty Osaka and Kawasaki City Hall.
21. Igarashi Yoshikuni, Bodies of Memory, p. 8

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