



*On Refusal*

As we enter the third year of a global pandemic, the necessity and urgency of creativity are evident in virtually every aspect of our lives. In the years since the exhibition *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* was conceived, it has also become clear that the decades-long struggle to end inequities in the U.S. cannot be fully realized until the settler colonial origins of American governance are effectively addressed. Every major issue facing Americans today can be traced back to these origins and their modern manifestation as what bell hooks termed “imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy,” from state-sanctioned violence in the form of police killings and migrant detentions to mitigating climate change.

Audre Lorde’s *Poetry is Not a Luxury* opens with the observation that “[t]he quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.” During her lifetime, Lorde was active in political and creative movements that directly related to how she navigated everyday life in the U.S. as a queer Black writer, activist, and mother. Thus, when we read this opening line, we understand that for her creativity and intentionality are inseparable as both a reflection of ourselves and our place in this world and how we seek to improve it. Forty-five years later, Lorde’s words continue to resonate and find new audiences, as creativity for so many, is not a luxury, but necessary to survival.

It was with this understanding of the power of creativity that the exhibition was curated, beginning with Miné Okubo’s 1946 graphic memoir *Citizen 13660*. Having been detained alongside hundreds of fellow Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and later incarcerated in a concentration camp in Utah, Okubo’s approach to art was strikingly similar to what Lorde described. For Okubo, documenting the realities of the camp not only allowed her to process her experiences but also served as a way to communicate with her friends and peers on the outside, most of whom could not fully grasp what was taking place at the remote camps. As cameras were prohibited and the federal government controlled how the camps were presented to the public, incarcerated artists and writers adapted their creative practices in order to record this dark chapter in American history. Having belonged to a vibrant and diverse community of artists in the Bay Area prior to World War II, Okubo insisted on remaining active during incarceration, while friends on the outside like SFMoMA founding director Grace McCann Morley and photographer Dorothea Lange attempted to support her in different ways. As an act of protest against Executive Order 9066, Morley continued to exhibit Okubo’s work in the galleries of the museum. Lange, whose government commissioned photographs of World War II detention centers and concentration camps were censored and essentially buried for decades by the American military, rallied San Francisco’s artistic community to fundraise for art supplies as Okubo and other incarcerated artists established art schools in the camps. Okubo’s camp drawings and her frequent dispatches to friends, which included illustrated letters and postcards, ensured that the experiences of her community were amplified in the face of censorship, erasure, and state-sanctioned violence, while such acts of solidarity among her artistic circle provided a public platform for the dissemination of her potent content. *Citizen 13660* reflects her tenacity and the love and care with which she approached her community, the light with which she scrutinized her life and sought to bring about change.

With Okubo’s book at the center, the exhibition was assembled with works that reflect a similar sense of commitment and purpose, a light that guides viewers through narratives that are otherwise buried or ignored. As Lorde would have it, it is not simply the act of creating a poem or artwork that can lead



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to social change, but rather the level of intimacy that is achieved when we allow ourselves to enter that reflective space: “poetry as illumination.” All of the artworks included in this exhibition were created from a place of subjectivity, from lived experiences that are filtered through the creative process then articulated in forms that invite the viewer to partake in what Lorde called “revolutionary awareness.” The range of artists featured in the exhibition serves to map how for over seventy-five years, art has been a place where the American experience has been confronted head on as the legacy of settler-colonialism affects the lives of millions of people. As the exhibition travels to Minneapolis only a few weeks after yet another Black man, Amir Locke, has been killed by police, it is impossible to ignore this context, and perhaps even harder to sustain our belief that concrete change will ever come about.

Just a few years after *Citizen 13660* was published to wide acclaim, Okubo began transitioning toward an artistic style that favored the type of figuration found in traditional Japanese painting and among other examples of Non-Western visual culture. Unconcerned with illusionism, she instead focused on color, line, and shape, producing hundreds of paintings of women and children, self-portraits with cats, and floral still lifes. Spending the remainder of her life in Manhattan’s Greenwich village, Okubo was essentially at ground zero for developments in the New York art scene, where the celebration of performative masculinity in twentieth-century painting and the grip of white supremacy meant that an artist like her would most likely never be given her proper place in American art history. Her refusal to assimilate into this scene was in part driven by her realization that in order to know what it was like in the camps you had to have experienced it firsthand. It is not difficult then to understand how an artist who survived such terror would refuse to participate in a culture that had not exorcised the roots of its inherent chauvinism. As Okubo retreated into her work, her paintings and drawing created a world that stood in opposition, a place of personal rebellion. Her incarceration drawings had given her a template for artistic dissent. Similar acts of refusal can be found throughout the exhibition’s included works. Retreating into the realm of poetics, we find the courage and tools to do so.

Maymanah Farhat  
February 7, 2022  
Santa Cruz, California