

Ben Sakoguchi: Chinatown

published on the occasion of
Ben Sakoguchi's exhibition *Chinatown*
at Bel Ami, Los Angeles
March 6 - May 15, 2021

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This publication accompanies *Chinatown*, a solo exhibition by Ben Sakoguchi, whose witty combinations of commercial signage, history painting, and Pop Art comment on the American Dream and its fraught entanglement with xenophobia and racism. Essays by Eli Diner, Ana Iwataki and Steven Wong peel back layers of social satire within Sakoguchi's information-rich compositions. Sadly, there is an eerie timelessness to their discussions, following the murder of six Asian women in Atlanta spas and other recent incidents of anti-Asian violence. Sakoguchi's painting, *Chinatown* (2014), spells out a long and overlooked history of racism toward Asian Americans, and the story is not over. Sakoguchi's diagrammatic paintings elucidate how everything under the sun (from oranges to baseball, art, dogs, and war) is imbricated in the power dynamics of settler colonialism and capitalism. By breaking issues down and re-articulating them in vivid artworks, Sakoguchi refutes stereotypes and insists upon different ways of thinking about cultural relevance. We hope that this exhibition and publication are also part of that project.

In addition to our enormous gratitude to Ben Sakoguchi, we would like to thank his wife Jan Sakoguchi for her tireless contribution to this exhibition: framing, photographing, and packing paintings, interviewing the artist, editing texts, and hours of email correspondence. We also appreciate the support of the former directors of Potts, Alhambra: Olivian Cha, Eli Diner, Leah Glenn, Sean Kennedy, Asha Schechter—with special thanks to Jacqueline Tarquinio Kennedy for coordinating with the artist and Bel Ami to make the exhibition possible.

The Exhibition: *Chinatown* at Bel Ami
March 6 - May 15, 2021

With acrylic paint on canvas, Ben Sakoguchi reassembles imagery from film posters, newspapers, comics, and internet searches to reveal subtexts of local discrimination, mass media exploitation, and state-sanctioned violence. A Japanese American who spent years of his childhood living in an incarceration camp during World War II, Sakoguchi comments on a century and a half of prejudice against diasporic Asians. Contending with overlapping histories that contribute to ideas of Asian American identity, Sakoguchi creates an ironic primer on capitalism's treachery with an audacity that challenges and uplifts.

At the center of the exhibition at Bel Ami, a large painting of 15 framed panels, entitled *Chinatown* (2014), illuminates a dark page from LA's past; the Chinese Massacre of 1871 took place near Alameda and Los Angeles Streets, then known as Calle de Los Negros. After the Central Pacific Railroad was completed in 1869, animosity directed at the Chinese labor force got uglier. In 1871, when a police officer was killed intervening in a local feud, a mob of 500 rioters unleashed themselves onto the Chinese community. Between 18 and 20 were lynched that night. Only ten of the vigilantes stood trial. The charges were overturned on a technicality, and the defendants were never retried.

Sakoguchi's sardonic commemorative plaque, exhibited in Los Angeles' Chinatown one hundred and fifty years later, contrasts with the textbooks that consign the event to a sidebar or a footnote. Depicting hanging bodies in full color, Sakoguchi acquaints us with each victim by particularizing the

Chinatown at Bel Ami, exhibition view



clothing with great care. The figures are partially shielded from view by an overlaying red and gold pattern based on decorative screens, inviting a reexamination of Chinatown's architectural signifiers. In the 1930s, Chinese residents were forced to relocate to the New Chinatown, redesigned as a theatrical simulacrum for tourists. Old Chinatown, with its vibrant culture and painful past, was then covered over by railways.

In the surrounding panels, Sakoguchi conveys how negative stereotypes of Asians have proliferated in America, from the era of westward expansion to present day. Freely introducing his own twists, he uses vintage editorial cartoons and other ephemera to shift the narrative and make up for lost accounts. One painting juxtaposes propaganda against Asian railroad workers with politically-charged critiques of affirmative action today. In another, Sakoguchi paints a portrait of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear physicist imprisoned for spying, surrounded by traditional and non-traditional masks, a reminder of how Asian Americans are perceived as "perpetual foreigners." In the dynamic border, two panels pay homage to the Chinese men and women who served in America's military. Other works whimsically collage pulp media, from comic book villains to exotic Asian divas of the screen, often played by white women.

Confronted with the current rise of anti-Asian crimes and other manifestations of systemic racism, Sakoguchi's backward glance reveals how former president Trump's use of racist rhetoric and memes for political gain is nothing new. In an unsettling postscript to the 1871 massacre, one panel in *Chinatown* (2014) invokes the brutal 1982 murder of 27-year-old Vincent Chin, beaten to death by two white autoworkers in Detroit. Again, the perpetrators did no jail time and were each fined only \$3780. As the panel denotes: less than the price of a cheap car. By painting a bold banner of what has gone wrong in America, Sakoguchi calls for change.



Chinatown at Bel Ami, exhibition view



Arriving at the Oranges: A Picture from Somewhere
Eli Diner

When Ben Sakoguchi initiated his series of Orange Crate Label paintings in 1974, he had recently stopped exhibiting in commercial galleries. It seems significant that the breakthrough marked by these paintings should coincide with his withdrawal from the art market, indeed from the art world. He would work on the series into the early 1980s, producing hundreds of variations, and then, taking it up again in 1994, making hundreds more. Meanwhile, he avoided meeting with gallerists or curators, although he would agree to occasional shows at university galleries and regional museums; his career was that of a teacher, giving courses in painting at Pasadena City College for some three decades.

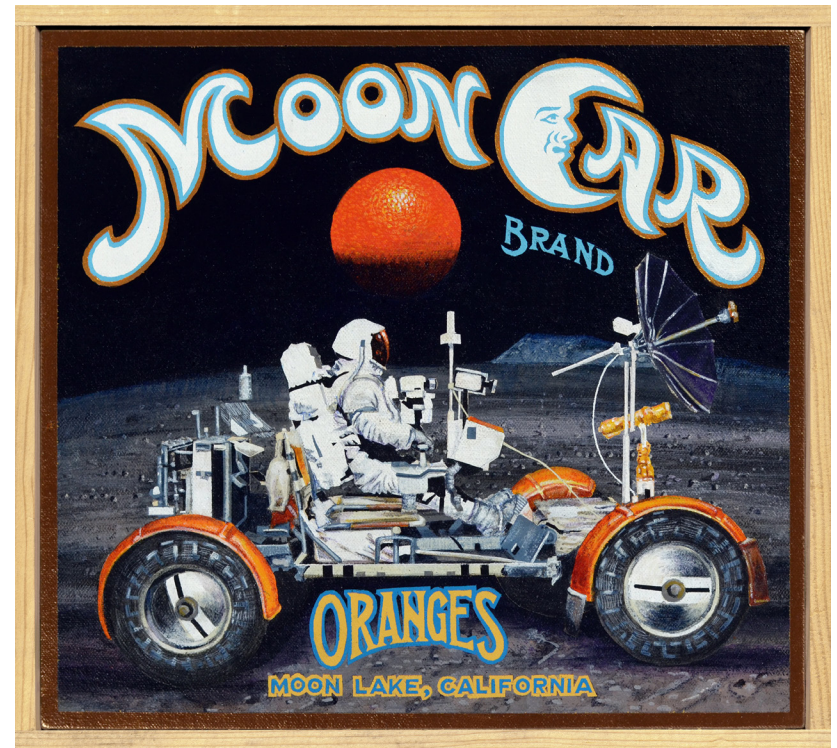


There is romance to the story of an artist untempted by the glint of success, drawn to the purer light of his own obsessive vision. The orange crate labels are a project of obsession. In the antique style of the labels that once adorned wooden crates of fruit shipping out from California, the paintings adhere to a simple set of rules: each is 10 by 11 inches and each must include an orange, a brand, and a real location in California, past or current. Through this rubric Sakoguchi conducts a flow of imagery from current events and history, politics and popular culture. War, baseball, racism, art. The subjects are wide-ranging and idiosyncratic; with a sometimes sardonic, sometimes goofy sense of humor, they demonstrate a curiosity with historical patterns and deeply felt political commitments. Several early paintings show the influence of the antiwar and anti-nuclear movements, like *Atomic Brand* (c. 1975), depicting a vast mushroom cloud and blistered orange floating in the foreground with the slogan, "Deformed but delicious!" *Weeny*

Wagon Brand, from 2011, is a tribute to the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, part of a sub-series devoted to cars (other subjects include the Apollo Moon Buggy and the crucifixion of Chris Burden on a VW Beetle).

We might take the series, then, as a kind of archive of personal passions inscribed in a visual language Sakoguchi discovered as a child in San Bernardino. But as Sakoguchi tells it, he didn't revolt against the art world, he wasn't dropping out. There were practical factors: Ceeje Gallery, where he'd found a home coming out of grad school in 1964, shuttered in 1970. Mainly though, he says he just didn't like it: "I never felt comfortable in the gallery world, and I never felt comfortable with curators," because he couldn't stand the obligatory boosting of his own art.¹ "All your time," he warns, "will be spent promoting your work."² So, fleeing the demands of promotion, he landed on a type of painting that assumes a promotional form—the orange brand labels. Abandoning the commerce of the galleries, he started making paintings in merchandising drag.

Beginning in the 1870s, the citrus industry radically transformed the economy and landscape of Southern California. The following decade, the growers, now sending oranges east by the trainload, first began affixing labels to the crates. These colorful lithographs depicted an Edenic California and the vitalizing effects of its fruits. The expansion of what historian Douglas Cazaux Sackman has dubbed the orange empire, particularly following the establishment and increasing monopoly power of the California Fruit Grower's Exchange (the predecessor of Sunkist), hit a crisis point in the mid-1920s as output of oranges surpassed demand.³ The crate labels now were just one piece in a multifront marketing campaign of billboards and radio and magazine advertisements, the rearguard in the industry's war against the underconsumption of citrus. By the 1970s, wooden crates had been replaced by cardboard cartons and the old labels were becoming collector's items, a



Moon Car Brand, 2011



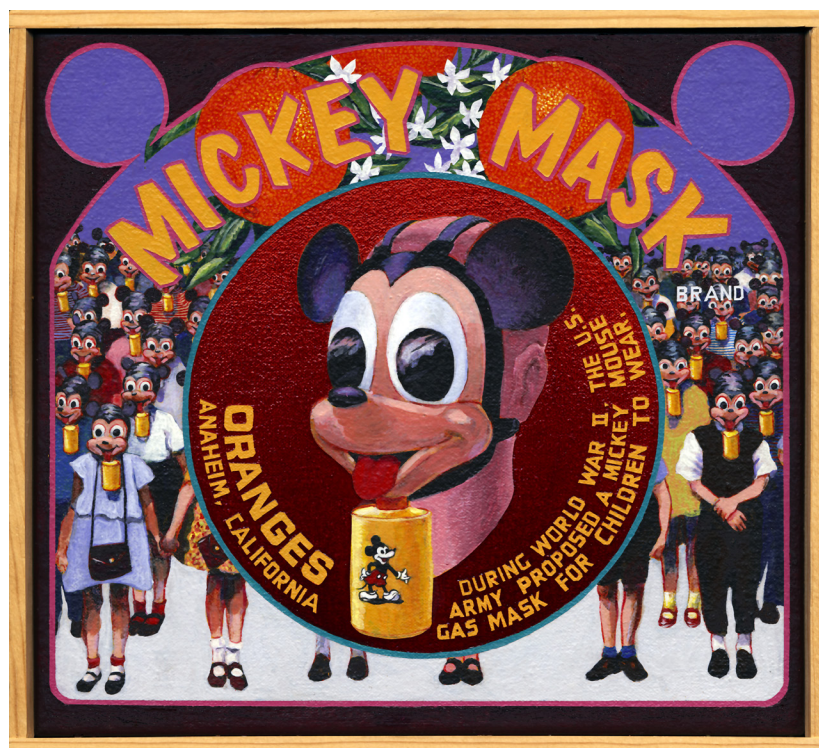
Beetlemania Brand, 2011



distant relation to those art nouveau posters of the fin de siècle, cherished for their old timey charm.⁴

In adopting the regional vernacular of the orange crate labels, Sakoguchi enacts a kind of reversal: where the originals had sold California to the world, here the world—in its horrors and follies—is delivered to the Golden State. *42,000,000 Brand* depicts a playful Stalin with peek-a-boo views of a couple of his victims in the background. *Silly Hats Brand* (1998) is a record of a few of the many silly hats worn by the British Royals. Notwithstanding tributes to such far-flung subjects as the Moon and Mars, the dominant key is Americana: it's the US empire grafted onto the orange empire: slavery and the Yellow Peril, Jim Jones and Abu Ghraib, but also Muhammed Ali, Billie Holiday, Albert Einstein. *The Prez and the King Brand* (1998) reproduces the famous image of Elvis and Nixon as a floating orange wears a jauntily cocked crown. Others focus on lesser known material. *Mickey Mask Brand* (1995), for example, offers this helpful explanation of its subject: "During World War II, the U.S. Army proposed a Mickey Mouse gas mask for children to wear." Its center is occupied by an example of this profoundly creepy relic—bug-eyed, wagging tongue—while a small world of children wearing these things recedes into the horizon.

That the old labels, which indulged in easy but ideologically potent mythologizing, had aged into nostalgia items by the time Sakoguchi arrived at his series, made them ripe for satire. However, his adoption of this format, even while it affords a stark foil to, say, Nick Ut's famous image of Vietnamese children fleeing a napalmed village in *Napalm Brand* (c. 1977), is not only ironic. Sakoguchi's earliest memories are of life in the Japanese incarceration camp in Poston, Arizona, but he speaks of his childhood after the war, amid the orange groves of San Bernardino, in idyllic terms and cites the labels on the crates, stacked in the back of his family's grocery, as captivating to him as a child—an aesthetic education in the absence of museums.⁵



His training in printmaking might also have contributed to his appreciation of the lithography of the labels. Sakoguchi earned an MFA from UCLA, studying under John Paul Jones, an artist of moody and macabre figures in a broadly modern style, who established the school's printmaking program. Sakoguchi's etchings of the mid-1960s are dense all-over collages of clashing imagery, textures and proportions. He showed these works and subsequent paintings in a few small museum and university settings and a string of exhibitions at Ceeje in the 1960s. Launched in 1959 by Cecil Hedrick and Jerry Jerome—like most of their artists, UCLA alumni—Ceeje began life as a craft gallery and quickly grew into a redoubt of figuration on La Cienega, an eccentric and out-of-tune counterpoint to the immaculate plastic of the emergent LA Style, the “ragged edge” to Ferus gallery's cutting edge per critic Fidel Danieli.⁶ Sakoguchi here joined ranks with Charles Garabedian, Joan Maffei, Eduardo Carrillo, Les Biller, Roberto Chavez and others, a roster steeped in surrealism, expressionism, folk art, and kitsch.

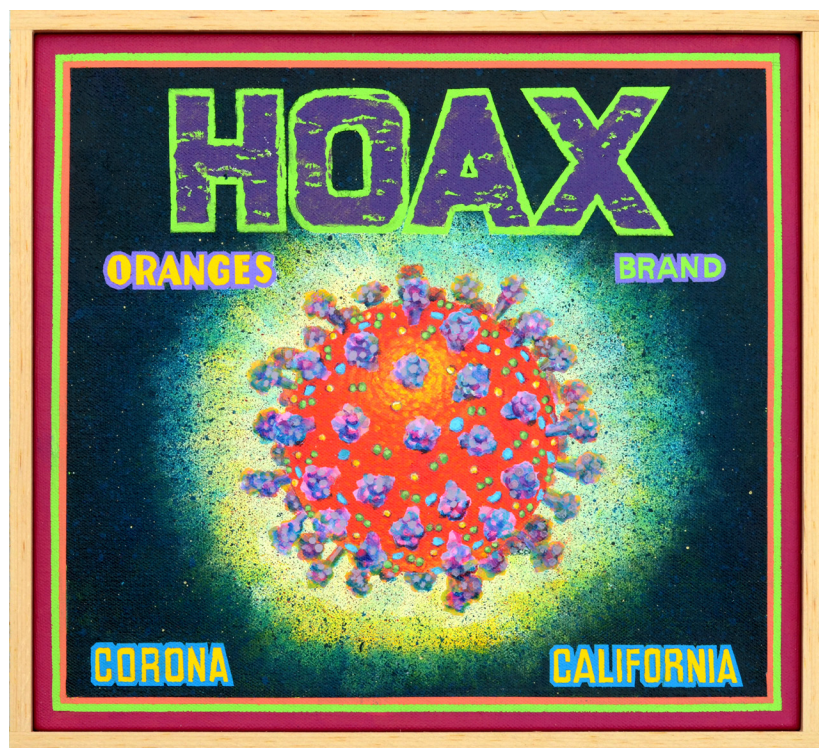
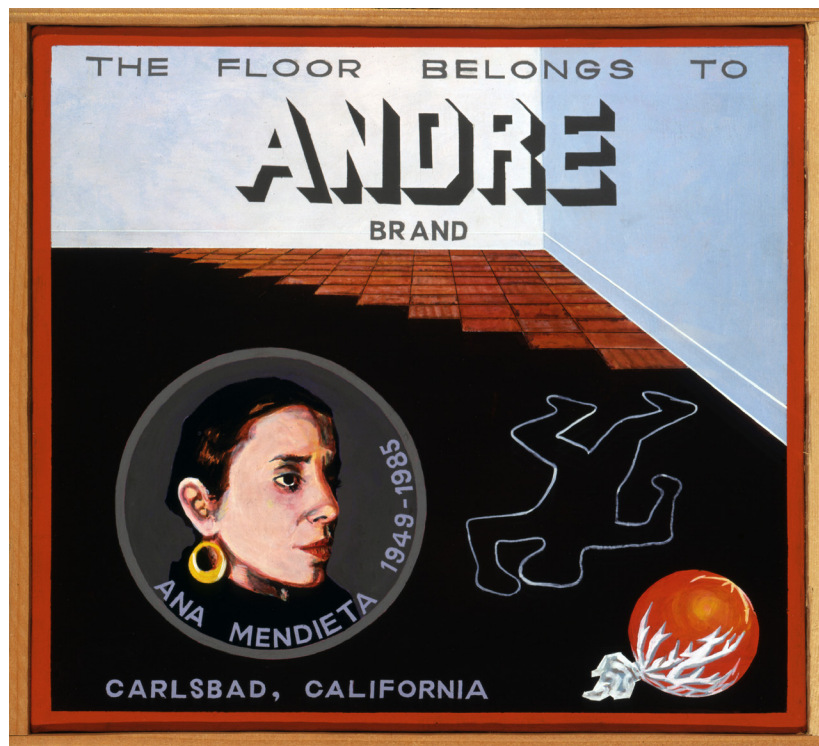
Like the etchings, Sakoguchi's paintings of the period entail wild collaging of imagery and pattern, accompanied, of course, by an outburst of color. In shaped canvases and at an increasingly grand scale, Sakoguchi rendered a cartoon frenzy of protest, youth culture and sexual revolution, supplemented by historical quotation and icons of art, groovy decorative motifs and snatches of graphic design. These keyed-up pop canvases have the feel of a McLuhanian media spree, a sensorium happily overheating in the excess and unruliness of representation. It is in relation to this uncontainable flow of imagery that the orange crate labels must finally be understood. With their few immutable constraints and small scale, they work to hold in place, if only momentarily, a picture from somewhere. So, *Ozone Hole Brand* (1995) comes out of Warm Springs, California. *The Floor Belongs to Andre Brand* (1994), which addresses Carl Andre's murder of Ana Mendieta, is based in Carlsbad. And *Hoax Brand* (2020), aimed at COVID denialists, is from Corona.



Napalm Brand, c. 1977



Ozone Hole Brand, 1995



Even as the orange crate label project works on the possibility of limitless expansion (just as the orange growers had dreamed), its fundamental logic diverges from the seriality of Warhol, which, in its churning repetitions, wears out the referentiality of the picture so that it ceases to point to a thing in the world.⁷ For Sakoguchi, the commodity form is just a frame. He throws it around some fragment of the world—large or small—and offers a summary quip. From a bird's-eye view, these many things and events and people momentarily framed coalesce into patterns. Since the early 2000s, Sakoguchi has worked increasingly in sub-series of orange crate labels: slavery, cars, airplanes, dogs and most extensively baseball. Meanwhile, this fragmentary approach has facilitated his paintings outside of the series since the 1980s, which frequently takes the form of small-scale serial and multi-panel works. *Bombs* (1983), for example, brings together scenes from the development of the American arms industry and bomb tests with a depiction of a survivor of Hiroshima and one of Nagasaki, their scarred backs to the viewer. *Towers* (2014) and *Postcards from Camp* (1999–2001) both treat the experience and infrastructure of the incarceration of Japanese Americans, the former in fifteen canvases and the latter forty. *Chinatown* (2014) surveys American anti-Asian violence and caricature in fourteen smaller panels around a larger central panel devoted to the Los Angeles Chinese massacre of 1871. Densely hung, these multi-panel works deploy the same illustrational style and satirical tone as the orange crate label, and likewise echo the series' amassing of fragments. Rather than encyclopedic, the cumulative effect is something like historical montage. The greater the breadth, the more partial it seems, as if to say that art is always framing fragments. It is small, and the world is a big orange.

Notes

1. Interview conducted by Jan Sakoguchi in preparation for the present show.
2. Ibid.
3. Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 86–87.
4. Gordon McClelland, *California Orange Box Labels: An Illustrated History* (Beverly Hills: Hillcrest Press, 1985).
5. J-Sak, “The Unauthorized History of Baseball in 100-odd Paintings: The Art of Ben Sakoguchi,” Vimeo video, running time, 4:38, March 2016, <https://vimeo.com/160301913>
6. Fidel Danieli, “Ceeje—the Gallery, the Artists, the Art” in *Ceeje Revisited* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1984), 10.
7. Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 202. Sakoguchi’s work would seem to adhere more closely to what John Coplans, making a distinction with Warholian seriality, calls theme and variation: “the structure may be the same, but the composition is sufficiently varied so that each painting, though belonging to a set, can be recognized as unique.” John Coplans, “The Early Work of Andy Warhol,” *Artforum*, March 1970, 54.



Yellow Peril Brand, c. 1975



Slavery Lite! Brand, 2009



As a child, Ben Sakoguchi was incarcerated with his family in Poston, Arizona; these war years were the ones in which he was most surrounded by other Japanese Americans. As in many Japanese American families, after the war Sakoguchi's parents encouraged their children to inhabit the role of good Americans. The phrase *shikata ga nai* [it can't be helped] is often used as shorthand for the older generations' approach of silent, stoic acceptance of the injustices they lived through. His mother only expressed her anger about the incarceration, that she "hated every single day," at the end of her life when she was dying from cancer.¹ These early experiences left Sakoguchi with visceral knowledge of the inherent danger and instability of being Other in a fundamentally racist society. The histories created and concealed by this foundational aspect of the United States are a driving force of the *Chinatown* paintings, as well as bodies of work similar in their multi-canvas, quasi-didactic formats such as *Towers* (2014), which directly stems from his experiences of incarceration, and *A Brief History of Slavery* (2008-2009). Sakoguchi's approach to representing the histories of disparate communities of color points to an understanding of their entanglement under white supremacy.

Still, I'll proceed as cautiously as I can in this discussion of paintings that include representations of an historical massacre of Chinese workers, made by an artist who is Japanese American, exhibited at an art gallery whose presence is itself a contentious element of current issues in Chinatown regarding gentrification and artwashing. I'm wary of the double consciousness of identification and representation, in their capacities to both generate empathy across difference

and to constrain with categories. There are at once problems and potential in relating histories of Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans, Asian Americans and other communities of color, of Little Tokyo and Chinatown, of writer and artist, of community organizer and art worker. I am hesitant to fall into the traps of tribalism and essentialism, to generalize about the “Asian American experience” or “the art world.” And yet, considerations of visibility, a captive audience, and historical silence offer convincing arguments for performing the role of spokesperson, translator, or advocate, albeit occasionally and in select spaces. Without overly identifying with Sakoguchi, I can relate salient aspects of Japanese American cultural and political life to an audience less familiar with “our” history. This careful negotiation of identity as it informs artistic representation, scholarly interpretation, and solidarity in political action is worth considering in its relationship to the reflective distortion of racist images themselves. In both, the line between the self and the not-self is purposefully blurred. In 1982, Vincent Chin was killed by white men who took him for Japanese. Following 9/11 and Trump’s Muslim Ban, Japanese American activists powerfully pointed to the chilling similarities to their own experiences. These two instances demonstrate both the potential for violence and for coalition as identification moves through processes of flattening and expansion.

Sakoguchi’s painstaking collection and reproduction of images of Asians as they circulate through dominant visual culture seems to me inflected with a lifetime’s worth of being pissed off. I’ve been thinking a lot about aggression and (out) rage, expressions of emotions that are deemed excessive and thus made easy to ignore. In this I’ve of course been inspired by Sara Ahmed’s work in affect theory, which in its turn continues the work of Black feminists, such as Audre Lorde, on political anger. She says:

Your anger is a judgment that something is wrong. But then in being heard as angry, your speech is read as motivated by anger. Your anger is read as unattributed,



Postcards from Camp (Arizona), 1999–2001



Postcards from Camp (Idaho), 1999–2001

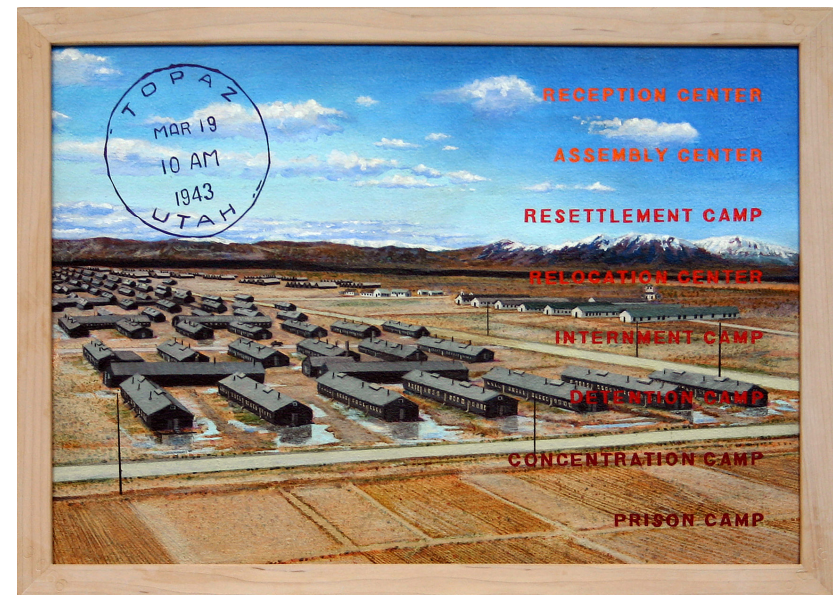
as if you are against x because you are angry rather than being angry because you are against x. You become angry at the injustice of being heard as motivated by anger, which makes it harder to separate yourself from the object of your anger. You become entangled with what you are angry about because you are angry about how they have entangled you in your anger. In becoming angry about that entanglement, you confirm their commitment to your anger as the truth “behind” your speech, which is what blocks your anger, stops it from getting through. You are blocked by not getting through.²

Owning and expressing anger has been and continues to be a cathartic, transformational tool for Japanese Americans. During the congressional hearings of the 1980s that eventually led to reparations, many survivors of incarceration spoke for the first time about the emotional and psychological toll of their experiences during the war. In one of the more well-known clips from these hearings, activist Yuji Ichioka forcefully says, “Yes, we have been quiet—*otonashii*—now we have become the opposite—*yakamashii*,” which is followed by raucous yells and applause.³ Excess, noise, silence, invisibility, and acquiescence are bound up in the racist imaginary of the Asian American. Sakoguchi’s paintings draw so directly from trope and stereotype that in their saturated reproduction, they tip over from directness into ambiguity. Depiction of historical violence is part of this ambiguity. Who can speak, to which audience, and under what circumstances, remains a legitimate question inextricable from systems of power.

The burden of rationalizing the chaotic—that is, the deeply irrational logics and cartographies of settler colonialism, slavery, and capitalism—usually falls to those who suffer most under this chaos. It’s essential to recall the unevenness of who has been allowed to express anger or establish boundaries, who has been granted agency and self-determination. The right to acknowledge difference functions differently in the lived experiences of those who live in the shadow of Exclusion



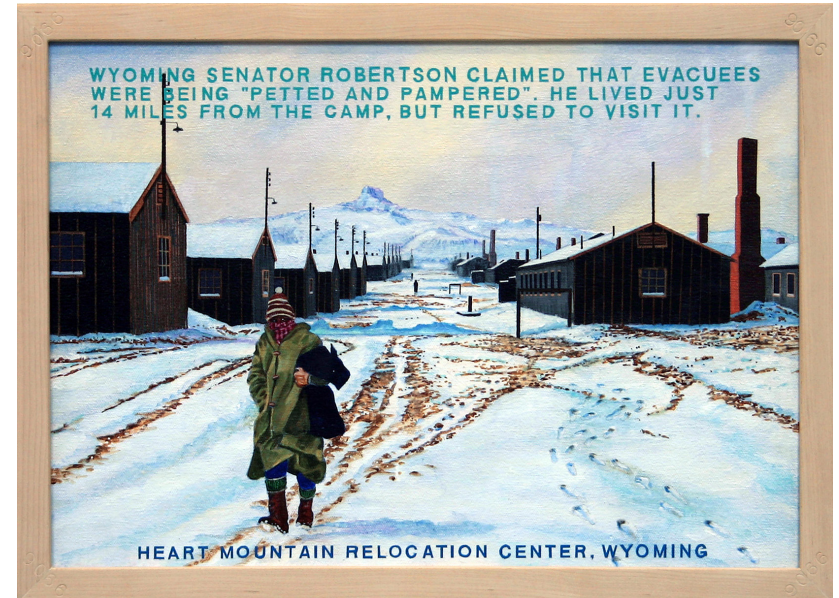
Postcards from Camp (Utah signs), 1999–2001



Postcards from Camp (Utah view), 1999–2001

Acts, redlining, gentrification, and xenophobic violence. And within communities of color, an intersectional lens must be continuously and rigorously applied, so as not to lose sight of the further nuanced dynamics of gender, class, and education. Asian Americans, insofar as they can be described as some kind of unified group, have always existed in a liminal space within the nexus of American race relations, disrupting the binary of white and black, intermittently benefitting and suffering from various shades of non-belonging. We are triangulated, one point in the triads of settler-native-settler of color or white-black-other. Our relationship to Indigenous communities further complicates struggles of self-determination and community control of neighborhoods marked by histories of displacement, racism, redlining, and disinvestment.

In the midst of the particular chaos created by the biopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic and perpetually racist, uneven development that proliferates across Los Angeles, the art world, as a system that relies on capital, prestige, and privilege, is often made to be at odds with, even weaponized against, struggling communities. A defensive response often emerges, a dissatisfactory discourse that compares the vulnerability of artists and art workers to that of working class people of color. This can't be reconciled rationally or simply because it derives from forces that are huge and bearing down on us all too quickly. However, I'm not interested in discounting an intentionally crafted narrative only to replace it with abstract notions of inevitability or incommensurability. People who are suffering most in present-day Chinatown are angry and some of that anger is directed towards galleries, artists, and art workers. That has to be truly heard and truly seen, by us. In this dynamic, my use of "we" distorts, shifts, and doubles. All I can do is wade into the discomfort of splitting, doubling, straddling. I'm forced to ask myself in what and how many ways I am complicit. And beyond that, what are the possibilities, for art workers and cultural institutions, to move beyond a position of complicity?



Postcards from Camp (Wyoming), 1999-2001



Postcards from Camp (Koi, Arizona), 1999-2001

To this end, I've tried to listen deeply to those who inhabit the space of this text, which includes the Los Angeles Chinatown of the past, present, and cultural imaginary, the neighborhood as it is represented by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), Ben Sakoguchi's artistic practice, Bel Ami as a physical gallery and metonym for the art world. Deep listening includes paying close attention to their chosen narrative forms as well as their presumed audiences. When I reached out to CCED, a representative told me dialogues with gentrifying businesses, such as art galleries, serve to communicate their stance that rented spaces should be returned to entities that will provide services and goods for low-income community members of color. Once they expressed this to me, and that such conversations detract from mutual aid work, I recognized that in order to enact deep listening I should request no more of their time or energy. We ended our conversation, but to continue to listen to them, you can read their "Open Letter to Artists."⁴

For Sakoguchi, his painting practice is inseparable from his politically charged understanding of the world, which has long contributed to his sense of being an outsider, at odds with both the art world and Japanese American activism. As I negotiate my relationship to both, a generation later, I'm doubly invested in blurring those lines between inside and outside, for his sake and mine. He's described the "risk-benefit" gamble of his art-making, which he considered in the context of this exhibition:

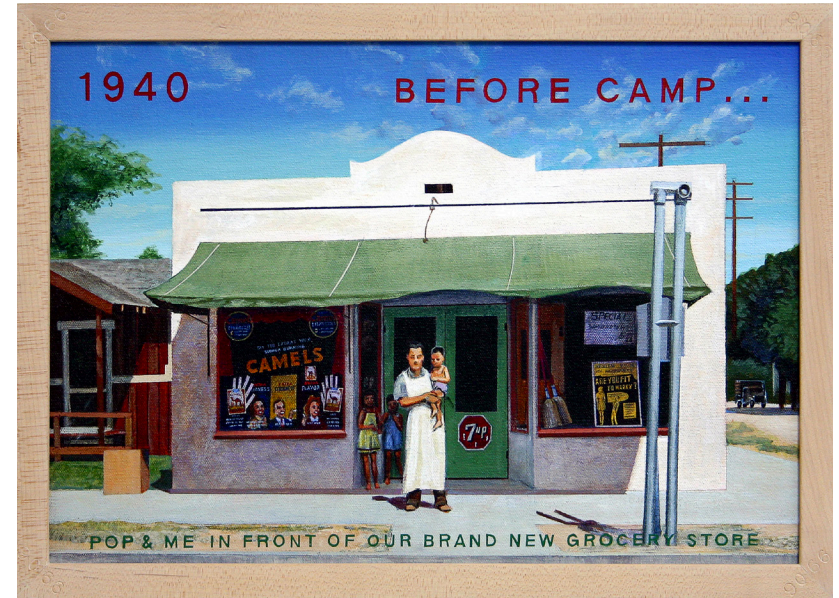
I don't know the answer [...]. I think hopefully showing the piece in Chinatown may relate to people there but it may not. But it's the best place for it. But at the same time, I understand their views on the subject. They don't want to become like everywhere else. I do think it has a point being shown there. Whether the people themselves accept it, I can't speak for them. Because it's their values, their own understanding of the world that is not invested in the art world as we know it. That

painting is about something that is really...gentrification. You realize that they took that neighborhood, where they hanged Chinese people and they put Union Station there.

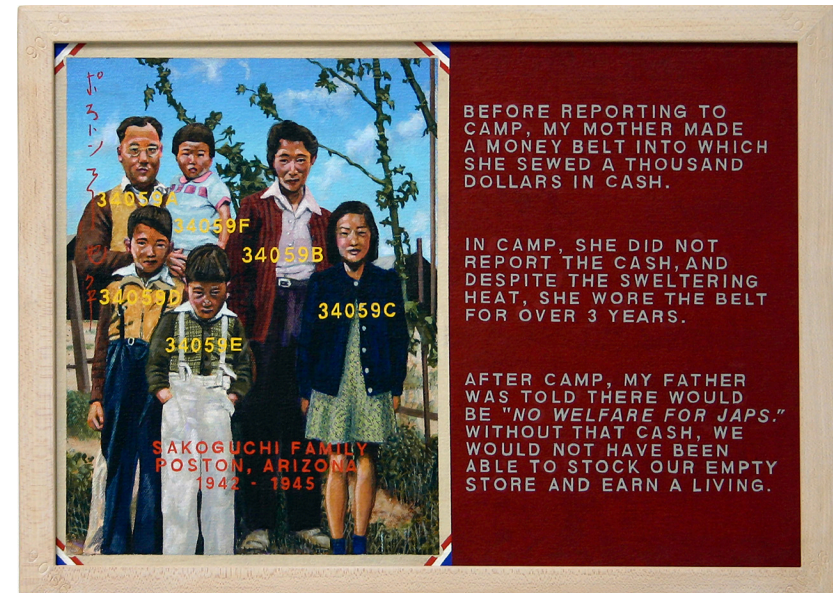
An individual, a group, or a community can alternate between states of porous and more fixed boundaries. The feeling of "It's me, but it's not me" is mobilized in unwanted but potentially productive ways for art workers in discourse about gentrification and art washing. If this leads to uncanny, uncomfortable moments of reflection—of seeing ourselves represented as we might not want to be seen—let's take into account whose vision it is. Recoiling from these reflections is a beginning, not an end. Sakoguchi's work makes clear that averting the gaze from distasteful visions, whether they're born from the harmful oppression of racist ideology or strategic criticism of community organizing, should no longer be an option. I'll return to Ahmed who says, "[Emotions] are sites of struggle, and we must persist in struggling with them."⁵ The art world at its best could serve as a nexus of those who suffer most under chaos and those who suffer least, if the latter cease to dictate the former's ability to establish boundaries, reclaim excess, and express anger, grief, joy, or any other emotion on their own terms. Particular experience can be recognized, as can new and shifting solidarities forged under rising rents, climate change, and pandemic. As long as we live in this chaos there is no possibility of purity. This doesn't mean that we don't endlessly try to listen deeply. Our proximity to other listening subjects contains the possibility of generative distortions within the spaces that need them most. The liminal positions we inhabit are also sites from which we can struggle to make the chaos more livable for more of us.

Notes

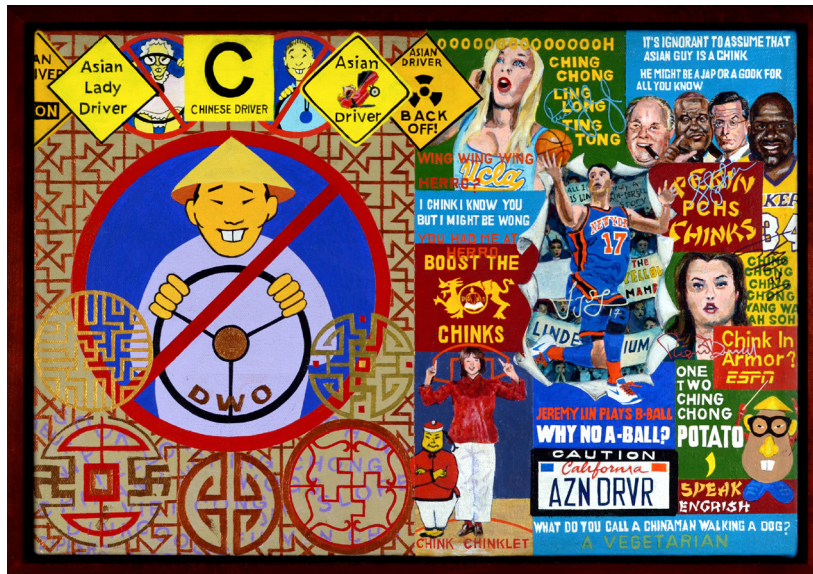
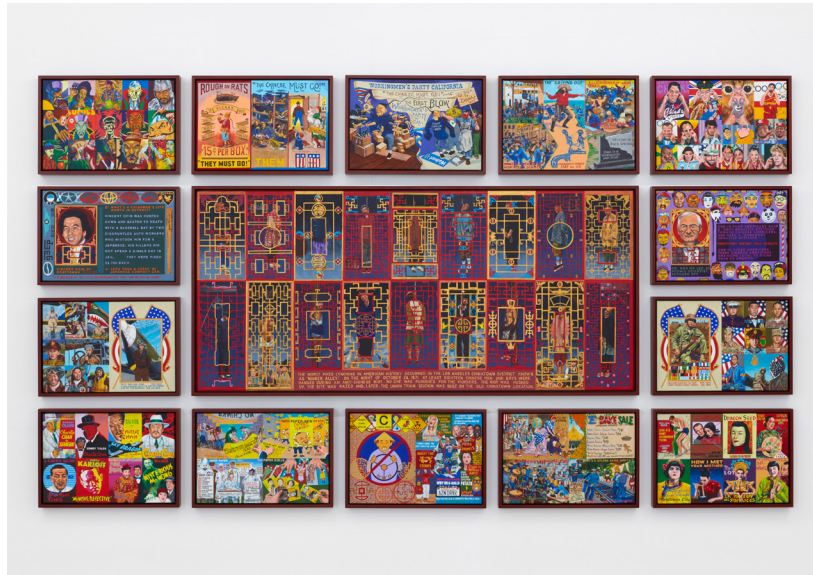
1. janmdotorg, "Drawing the Line - Ben Sakoguchi," YouTube video, running time, 4:06, March 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7g0V56zpdM0>
2. Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," S&F Online Issue 8.3, 2010.
3. janmdotorg, "Day of Remembrance 2017," Youtube video, running time, 2:16:04, March 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlrKwxxr0oM>. This is referenced in Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress's *The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, published in 2018 by UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.
4. Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, "An Open Letter to Artists from Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED)," October 18, 2019, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TYHEWJSeS1ymZH6HcxRp4qFACzbXPQoTWiimu1C4zK4/edit>
5. Ahmed.



Postcards from Camp (Before Camp), 1999-2001



Postcards from Camp (Money Belt), 1999-2001



As I write this in March 2021—coming up on one year of the pandemic in the U.S., while police are still brutalizing our black brothers and sisters—I have never feared for the safety of our BIPOC communities more. Today, violence against Asian Americans is again on the rise, and now, much closer to home. Last year, in my home city of South Pasadena, a friend was verbally assaulted and called “gook.” Last month, the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo, a pillar of the community and where my kids learned to play taiko, or Japanese drums, suffered vandalism and arson. This week, according to initial reports, three Asian-owned businesses were attacked and eight people were shot and murdered, six of whom were Asian women. In 2020, anti-Asian hate crimes surged 149% nationally, and this year we’re on track to far exceed that. While some may attribute this increase in violence to the xenophobic rhetoric of the previous presidential administration and his ship of fools, violence against Asian American communities has long been part of the fabric of America, existing since our arrival to this land.

Ben Sakoguchi’s work has continually addressed race in America and its impact on BIPOC communities. Currently, his *Chinatown* exhibition at Bel Ami provides historical insight and reveals contemporary manifestations of America’s racial animus against Chinese Americans, and ultimately, Asian Americans writ large.

In the late 1980s, my high school art teacher, La Monte Westmoreland, assigned a project based on Sakoguchi’s *Orange Crate Label* series, giving me my first introduction to his

work. With an arts education that primarily referenced white men and works of art, lacking in social content, the impact of this early exposure to Sakoguchi's work was significant. Still, it wasn't until my college education in Asian American studies, and the cultural production of Asian American artists, that I would come to know the larger import of Sakoguchi's work in highlighting how Asian American history entwined with the development of California's agricultural infrastructure. When I went on to teach Asian American history, I incorporated in my lectures many of the original source images used for his *Chinatown* installation. His playful paintings provide a visual survey of Chinese American history and contemporary issues, providing contextual insight into the violence we're experiencing today.

As such, to fully understand Sakoguchi's *Chinatown*, one must look back to the racist violence that permeates US history. Asian migrants first arrived in the Americas starting in the 1500s. Chinese and Filipinos were sailors and stewards for the Manila Galleon trade and ended up settling in Acapulco and Mexico City. 300 years later, Western imperial meddling in China, the displacement of millions from their traditional livelihoods in various parts of Asia, and the California gold rush pushed many Chinese to come to California in significant numbers—over 25,000 by 1850. It was also in 1850 that the census reported the first Chinese immigrants living in Los Angeles, and shortly after L.A.'s Chinatown came into being.

Soon after Chinese immigrants arrived in the West, they faced violence, harassment, and anti-Chinese legislation as centuries of Orientalism transformed into a unique American brand of white supremacy and racism, reinforced by nativism, xenophobia, and Sinophobia. Despite all of this, the interests of capitalism necessitated a new source of exploitable labor after the emancipation of American slaves in 1865. The demand for cheap Chinese labor dramatically increased, and with it, the racial animus against Chinese immigrants. Following, the financial Panic of 1873 resulted in the Long Depression



"Paper Son" panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



"Rough on Rats" panel from *Chinatown*, 2014

“The Driving Out” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Bake Sale” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



(1873-1879), which provided labor organizations and politicians the opportunity to scapegoat the Chinese for societal and economic afflictions in the U.S. This eventually led to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting most immigration from China. Sakoguchi notes the importance of this legislation, referencing it in one of the *Chinatown* panels.

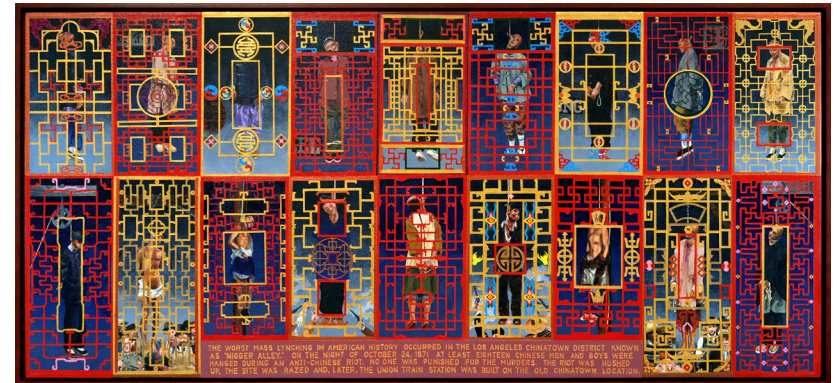
Just a few years after the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, there were dozens of violent anti-Chinese mob incidents throughout the American West, several of which Sakoguchi depicts in *Chinatown*. While Sakoguchi gives space to historical and contemporary racist media depictions and political propaganda that have influenced Chinese American history, most prominent in the panels of *Chinatown* is the violence that has shaped Chinese American and Asian American history. One panel illustrates several major incidents in the 1880s, including an 1880 anti-Chinese mob that razed an entire neighborhood in Denver, in an attempt to cleanse the city of the Chinese population. Two days prior to the attack, on October 31, 1880, a small dispute between whites and two Chinese men broke out at a local saloon, which escalated into a three-day riot of 3,000 locals, indiscriminately targeting all Chinese residents and destroying the Chinese quarters. Local and national conservative news outlets—concerned about the upcoming local and national elections in November 1880—added fuel to the fire by publishing articles about the “Chinese issue” and amplifying anti-Chinese vitriol.

In another section of the same panel, Sakoguchi includes a rendering of Thure de Thulstrup’s illustration of Chinese miners massacred in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, which was originally published in the September 16, 1885 issue of *Harper’s Weekly*. Sakoguchi’s interpretation acknowledges Thure de Thulstrup’s original image as an icon memorializing the 1880s mob violence against Chinese in the West. Approximately 600 Chinese coal miners worked alongside white miners but disagreed on whether or not to strike for higher wages. The growing animus culminated into

a full-blown Chinese massacre killing 28, wounding 15, and burning down numerous houses that left 79 Chinese residents without homes.

Opposite the depiction of the Wyoming massacre, on the same panel, Sakoguchi memorializes the ethnic cleansing that began on November 3, 1885 in Tacoma and Seattle, Washington, when an armed anti-Chinese mob of 500 gathered before pushing out approximately 900 Chinese workers and residents. The mob violently expelled the first 600 workers from Tacoma's Chinatown before burning the district to the ground. Three months later, on February 7, 1886, another violent mob forcibly rounded up 350 Chinese residents of Seattle's Chinatown and forced them to board the *Queen of the Pacific* steamship in an attempt to ethnically cleanse the Chinese population from Seattle. It is this incident that Sakoguchi depicts on this panel. This event, like other anti-Chinese attacks and massacres that happened during the 1880s, was so violent that federal troops were called in to prevent something worse.

The 1880s mark the height of anti-Chinese violence in the U.S., yet Sakoguchi gives significant space to a prior violent event in 1871: the Chinese Massacre in Los Angeles' Chinatown, which was the largest mass lynching in U.S. history. A white and Mexican mob of 500 anti-Chinese vigilantes hanged 18 Chinese men and boys. The largest panel of *Chinatown* depicts traditional Chinese lattices—used in Chinese gardens and restaurants, an Orientalist depiction—behind which linger representations of the lost individuals. The names of the murdered include Ah Cut, Chee Long “Gene” Tong, Chang Wan, Leong Quai, Ah Long, Wan Foo, Tong Won, Ah Loo, Day Kee, Ah Waa, Ho Hing, Lo Hey, Ah Wing, Ah Won, Wing Chee, Wong Chin, and Wa Sin Quai. After the massacre, eight of the rioters were convicted of manslaughter, but the charges were overturned on a legal technicality and they were never retried. The massacre fueled anti-Chinese sentiment in L.A., and the Anti-Coolie club was formed in 1876. A year later in 1877, the Workingmen's Party



“Los Angeles” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014

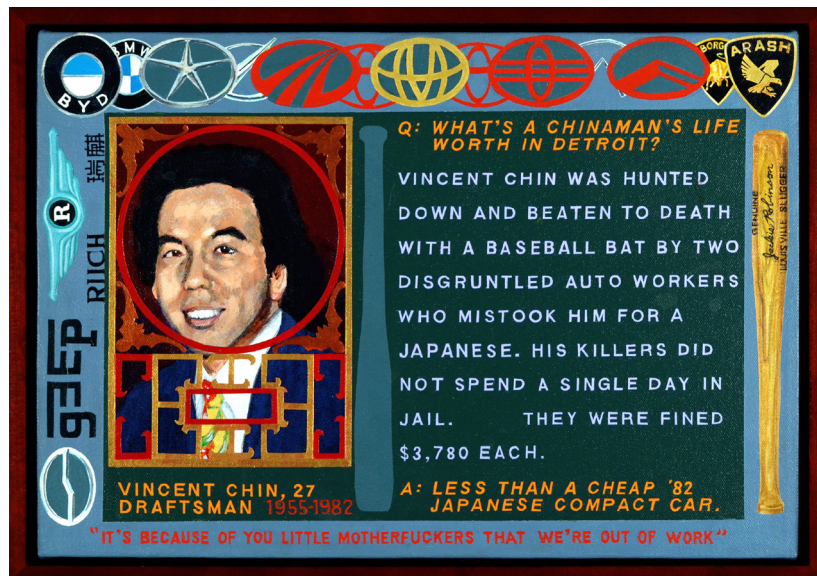


“Workingmen's Party” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014

“Dr. Wen Ho Lee” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Vincent Chin” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



of California formed, led by Denis Kearney. Sakoguchi depicts both the political party and its leader, along with racist propaganda of the day.

Though much of the anti-Chinese violence in this landmark artwork is from the 1880s, Sakoguchi makes some reference to more modern examples of how violence permeates the lives of Chinese Americans and Asian Americans in this country. Sakoguchi dedicates two panels to superpatriotism, highlighting how individuals and communities feel compelled to serve in the U.S. military, an institution of violence, in order to prove their Americanness and worth, and to combat continual racism and the perpetual foreigner stereotype too often assigned to Asian Americans. Despite attempts to prove their patriotism, violence continues against Asian Americans, which Sakoguchi acknowledges through two panels memorializing Asian American victims of racism and violence: Wen Ho Lee, who was falsely accused of being a Chinese spy solely because he was ethnically Chinese, and Vincent Chin, who was murdered in 1982 due to anti-Japanese hysteria after Japanese car imports led to layoffs and economic struggle in the U.S. automotive industry. Thus, Sakoguchi's *Chinatown* illuminates racist violence that Chinese Americans and Asian Americans have long endured, and prompts an inquiry into why such violence continues today in the country, institutions, and communities around us.

Bel Ami is situated just a half-mile from the location of the Chinese Massacre, in the heart of a rebuilt immigrant community that is still struggling to survive after previous displacement in the 1930s. Rooted in white supremacy, the massacre was part of a systematic and deliberate process to displace a community. And while there are no lynchings in Chinatown's modern history, the community still faces threats of violent displacement in the much more subtle form of gentrification, which also serves white supremacy. With evictions and rent increases of up to 200%, Chinatown has become too costly for those who built it to call it home. Though some longtime

residents have the economic means to stay in the gentrifying neighborhood—or are lucky enough to access affordable housing—the bedrock of the community is eroding. As culturally relevant social institutions, markets, and services dwindle, so does the desire to remain in the gentrified neighborhood. This only exacerbates the displacement of low income immigrant families. Though the mob violence and ethnic cleansing of the 1880s may look starkly different than the gentrification happening today, the end results remain disturbingly similar in an atmosphere of violence that harms our immigrant communities.

There is little debate whether artists and arts spaces can—and do—contribute to the gentrification of immigrant and BIPOC neighborhoods; and L.A.’s Chinatown once again is experiencing systematic dismantling. As an artist who lived and worked in Chinatown in the 2000s, I saw firsthand, and likely participated in, the gentrification myself. However, artists and art spaces should contribute to the community and actively combat gentrification. Doing so requires years of listening, relationship building, and coalition building—a level of commitment most artists and art spaces can’t or won’t afford. Although I remain skeptical that most art spaces in Chinatown are meaningfully engaging with the surrounding community, I appreciate the efforts of the handful of galleries that do. Bel Ami’s exhibition with Ben Sakoguchi serves as an example; I hope that subsequent exhibitions and programs remain relevant to both art patrons and local community members. Sakoguchi’s *Chinatown* prompts us to ask how we can prevent art spaces in L.A.’s Chinatown from having an impact similar to the violent anti-Chinese mobs in the 1880s, systematically displacing entire communities. Sakoguchi’s art provokes a more intersectional conversation about race, power, violence, and history, and the exhibition, *Chinatown*, exemplifies this. In order to have a better future, it’s urgent to bring awareness to these violent histories and the sociopolitical contexts that create them. Sakoguchi’s *Chinatown* can play a pivotal role in creating a space for these discussions and promoting active engagement, and by doing so, take part in building a more just society.



“Ming” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Eyes” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014

“Dragon Seed” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Charlie Chan” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Pilots” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



“Soldiers” panel from *Chinatown*, 2014



Selections from Interviews with Ben Sakoguchi January and February 2021

Childhood: Camp and Citizenship

Most of my earliest recollections are in Poston, Arizona relocation camp [1942-1945]. As a kid, your memories weren't especially painful—you just needed to know why you were there. And coming out of camp, I tried to figure out why we were there, by reading books... and it was never in there. So you just accepted it as part of your life—and whatever that meant, you didn't know.

Southern California was the best place in the world for me, in the sense that it has diversity. My neighborhood—I grew up in San Bernardino—was primarily Hispanic; a Mexican American community with a few white people, a few Black people... some Asians. It was diverse enough that it was okay. But when you started going to this high school that was almost all white... that was not a good time. But, going to community college, San Bernardino Valley College, was great—because suddenly you got into art in a meaningful way. You were not a particular race; you were either an artist, and any good, or you weren't... and at UCLA, especially that was true; then you met people that really took it seriously. And they said, “Hey, you belong here.” That's an affirmation of who you are. I think going to UCLA was good for me. USC students used to call it “3-J University” because it was “Japs, Jews, and Jigs,” and sure enough, my best friends were Jewish people and African American people.

What is it they say? All politics is local? My belief is all art is local. One of the things I was doing at UCLA was painting Abstract Expressionism. We all knew what was going

on, so I aped a lot of Abstract Expressionists until a New Yorker, a teacher named Arthur Levine said to me, “Why are you painting like a New Yorker?” [laughs] So you think, “Yeah, why am I painting like a New Yorker?” I was raised in Poston, Arizona relocation camp; I spent my growing-up years in San Bernardino; why am I doing abstract expressionism? I think that was an important thing. And then at UCLA you met women artists and Black artists (at that time their prospects were not very good, but they did it, anyway)... that was great. But I don’t think that’s the same as going to Yale, or Harvard, at that time. You’d come out different. And the art you learned was different. If you studied with Joseph Albers there, or Hans Hoffman, out of New York, you’d come out a different artist than you would if you went to UCLA. It’s like a religious belief. When you come out of the womb, you’re not Catholic or Jewish, you’re who you are. And yet your identity is formed as you grow up in life.

My family history: my father came from Japan in 1922. He came with his father and his sister to work on a chicken farm. My grandfather returned to Japan and my father grew up here, on his own. He married my mother, who was an American citizen, very fortunately. Because, people don’t realize that you could not—if you were born in Japan, or China—you could not become a naturalized citizen of the United States. You had to be born here. And that birthright citizenship which Trump now wants to get rid of—that’s the only reason my mother was a citizen. And they couldn’t take that away, so we were able to own property: the store was ours, in my mother’s name. My father couldn’t become a citizen until 1952 because there was a law, the Asian Exclusion act of 1924. People say that people should obey the law... well, if the law is incorrect, change it. You made it up, you change it! And that’s today, this thing about “law and order.” Well the law is who-makes-the-law. So anyway, my family history is that. So I’m not quite Nisei (second generation) and not quite Issei (first generation). I’m not quite Sansei (third generation) [laughs]. I don’t quite follow the script there, either.



Sakoguchi and friend Horace, c. 1947



Sakoguchi and sister Helen, c. 1947

After Camp

After my family came from camp, luckily, I think, we lived in a barrio section of San Bernardino, a relatively, more like a lower-middle-class... it wasn't really a poverty-stricken area. But there were art people; and one of the things about Mexican culture, especially, was that painting, or drawing, was a positive. It was something that, if you could do, you got respect. I could do the art, and I always did it there.

I got to Junior College in 1956 and I had to make career choices. My sister was an elementary school teacher, so I decided I was going into education. I took a lot of education courses, and I did painting there. You started to think, maybe you could have a future in art. And then when you got your teaching credential at UCLA you said, "You know, I'd like to go further; I'd like to take art more seriously." You started taking more and more painting courses and eventually got an MFA there. But many of us graduate students were iconoclasts who just went our own way, somehow, and never got caught up with the current trends in art. We just did what we did. Vija Celmins comes to mind in that respect; you can't quite peg her, really.

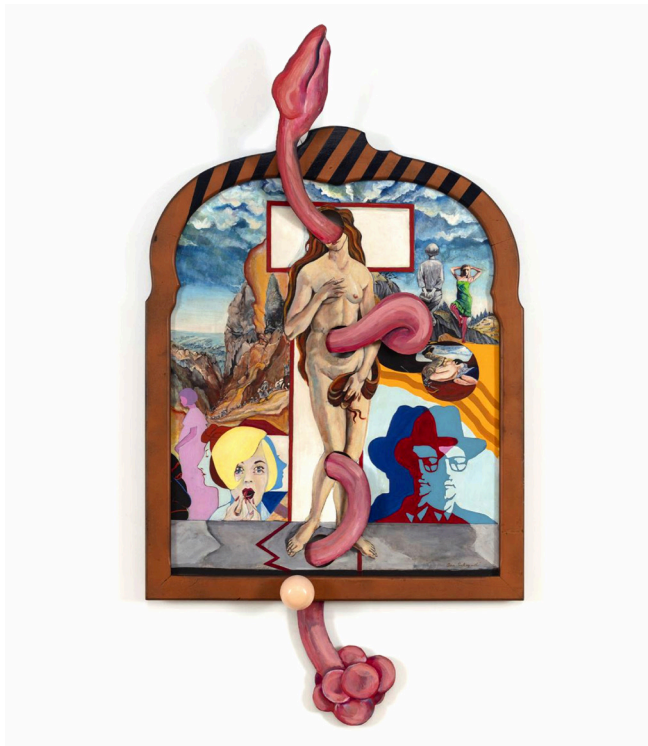
You're searching... You're not quite formed up yet, but you're looking for possibilities. If you look at the early stuff that I did, from 1963-64 to maybe the '70s... it was searching. You tried shaped-canvases and all sorts of different assemblage techniques; you tried combining multiple images... that, I got that from printmaking. When I first started going into art seriously, I was a printmaker, primarily doing etchings, studying under John Paul Jones, who I respected a whole lot. It wasn't that hard to transition and go into painting. The paintings were relatively large, six, seven, feet, and shaped, and they were multi-images. I always liked that part, where you would take current images and just put them together your own way, some sort of political theme there, but you weren't always conscious of it.



My Very First Interior, Koi, Koi + Dog, 1962



Untitled, 1962



At the same time [c. 1974] I became aware of orange crate labels. I looked at them and I saw lithographs, I mean real stone lithographs, and I started collecting them, and I started doing little takeoffs of them. It seemed like that was a good way of dealing with social commentary, actually, because you could do any subject matter. On actual crate labels, each individual orchard owner would include what he wanted, his dog, his cat, his wife, his kids, whatever... I liked that, and I liked the format.

Everyone was telling you, if you read *Artforum* (which you did), there was *Artforum*... there was *Art in America*, even (says it's "America" but it really wasn't, it's "global art")... I always wanna go the other way, if they're telling me. Maybe this comes from camp, or whatever—you were always an outsider. I never wanted to be part of an -ism, or a manifesto, or... So, you're searching for your own identity, and the orange crate label format seemed to fit me because of my background, growing up with the labels, and "non-art" in San Bernardino, and never feeling comfortable in the art world, really. So the labels—something that's regional—I liked that. And it was a format that you could keep consistently. I did learn you have to have some sort of a signature style, I mean, for anyone to know who you are. If everything you do is different, there is no coherence there.

So, that became me saying, "How do I do social commentary in a way that isn't the way everyone else is doing it?" So I just stuck it in that orange crate label format because you got to use items—breaking-the-rule items, if you will—still dealing with the Renaissance window (canvas-as-window), with a frame, using words, even political content (you were taught not to go political, in those days). So you just got to do it all in this little format, and it also kept a serial quality, which I liked: a modular, serial, system, which has stuck with me. My theory was that you could do anything you wanted to on that label format; just like the orchard-owner did. Anything. And

then, you could put them together in a serial way any way you wanted to.

But as you go further along in your career, you find certain themes that you're doing, and so you start bunching those canvases together. That helped me to establish this serial format of having a thematic cluster—rather than a random cluster. We used to say to the galleries, we just sent up boxes of labels, and we'd say, "You can hang 'em any way you want." And that became not satisfactory, somehow. And so, clustering canvases together in a certain thematic order became something I started to do, keeping that serial, modular system intact. But also, then, changing the orange crate format; why do I always have to put it in orange crates?

I wanted to keep it small... Another thing was gigantic scale: when working on the *Big Painting* [8ft x 52ft, in 4ft panels, c. 1968-70] you say, "Why am I doing this?" It didn't seem like that was me. I like to work at home in relatively small spaces. To make gigantic art, you have to have a gigantic studio and usually staff, to help move, and put that thing together, and I never worked that way. So, you started doing various formats, and scale changed slightly, but they were always modular, of various sizes, and then somehow it drifts into the Chinese piece. I had a series of multi-canvas paintings in mind: of Chinese and Japanese experience in America... working on the Korean one before the quarantine hit. Religion [*Comparative Religions 101* piece, 2014-19]. I want to do one on Art; on Aviation, which I've always been fascinated with. So, that seems the way that the Chinatown piece took shape, gradually, it just gets there. It ends up where it ends up, and right now it's a very satisfying way to work.



Big Painting, c. 1968-70



Sakoguchi with *Big Painting*, San Jose, 1978

On Process and Imagery

I take the images and I sort through them. The difference between now, and when I first started, is that I hoarded pictures—boxes and boxes and boxes, books and books and books—our house became basically a warehouse for all of that stuff. And sifting through images was really time consuming. Today, it's like magic—this computer is a magical instrument—because you can look up anything, about anything. I mean, it's just an amazing gadget. The amount of visual imagery is so vast that you can't possibly cover it.

The difficult part is how do you get it into a 10 x 11 inch square, which is the size of an actual orange crate label? Plus, you throw in the other factors that are the thread that runs through the whole series: you have to have a title; the word “brand” has to be in there; a city, a real city or location existent at one time in California has to be included; the word “California” has to be in; the word “oranges” has to be in there; and an orange, a visual orange somewhere in that picture. That's just the way I set up the parameters of how this series works. Then you start with whatever the image is, and you try to locate it somewhere, and you change the arrangement and stretch it and pull it, until it fits within the label.

I don't have a preliminary sketch of any kind; just a general idea of what you want to say, and then you just start there and things seem to fall into place. And that's how the painting develops—all my work does that—it just goes the way it goes. And with the computer, you start off with one thing in mind, and you end up with another, because the more information you read or see, you say, “Oh, it's really this.”

On Humor and Pain

You watch late-night-show TV? I do, because I work late at night. I watch these talk-show hosts and they are scalding with Trump. They are angry. They are so angry they don't know how to contain themselves, and yet they're on a comedy show. How could you not be angry at certain times? And yet, I think most of those guys are optimistic. And the funny part is the irony of it: these ideas that some people have, are mind-boggling.

My painting helps me to figure out what an issue is about. And do the works amuse me? No, but I really have fun doing them. I like to do these pictures. They fulfill the need in me to express myself about a particular thing. And whether someone else gets it or not, is not the point—it's that you throw out the idea, and, oftentimes it's not that I have an answer. It's that “Don't you think this is a peculiar situation?” is the statement there. “Don't you think this is odd? Don't you see the irony in this thing: that we say this, and it's the complete opposite of what we're doing?”

And, painful? Yes, “painful” was camp and racism. You talk about racism—I experienced it. It's hurtful and you can't explain that pain. So how does a Black person explain humiliation every day? And systemic racism every day? I've been there. It's built in, and you know it. Now, some people take it out with violence. Others do this: look at Black comedians, Eddie Murphy, some of these guys that can do this. Dave Chappelle. That's the way they can deal with it. If you go out and tell people, “Hey, this is a horrible thing you're doing to me,” they don't listen. So you approach it this way through comedy and the goal is to make the guy see, “Hey, is this really right to do this?” Maybe that's what I'm trying to do, too.

Being put in a camp, there, you never thought of racism as a kid because you were just living there. But when you look back on a life at 82 years-old, you say, “Shit, they stuck us in the middle of the desert!” When you see it from that

perspective, then you say, “Hey look, they’re doin’ the same thing to that guy over there!” And then what—are we gonna go out there and kill them? No, you can’t do that; you’re not that kind of a person. So you push back with the only way you have: the comedian can do it with a joke... I can do it with pictures.

I’ve never liked where the subject matter is trying to say, “This is a horrible, horrible thing!” I prefer not saying it, exactly—making them come to the conclusion, “Hey, this is not right.” But you never told them: “this is not right.” They figure it out by looking at your picture, or they hear your joke, or hear your music, or hear your poem.



American Myths and Realities

The American Dream is not mythic in the sense that... I think I’ve lived it, in a way. You know, if you come out of camp, you have nothing. And talk about systemic racism... everybody hated you. Everybody. The dream is: that you start off with nothing, and you can make a life here in America. Why do you think people want to come here? I mean, because there is a chance. Now, with that, goes the racism and prejudice, though. But you gotta work around it; find some way, hopefully, that isn’t too humiliating, to live within that context.

Now, you got to remember that, in camp, everything taught us to be American, because that’s what even the internees wanted to do—was prove they were good Americans. And so you became more American than the Americans outside [laughs]. You knew, all through your youthful years, that you were judged by racism. You saw it happen to other people as well, and you often identified with them, but you know you have to get along in a largely white-dominated society, and so you learn to cope. And if you can do that, they kind of make you an honorary white-American-citizen, sort of, as Asians are perceived today. But then, you should never forget: that hasn’t happened to everybody. And “systemic racism” is a good term, that wasn’t used before, you know. And you saw that, not so much like it was just after the war, where they would call you names, and often times it was a “you’re good at math,” sort-of-prejudice. I’m no good at math, but they kind of pigeonhole you in a certain way.

And you watch that today, especially when you watch the George Floyd murder: the cop didn’t even think about what he was doing, that you’re killing someone, right there, because it’s so ingrained, that this is a “bad guy” and you gotta be afraid of him, so he’s scared of the guy, and so he kills him.

And many people haven’t had the chance at the American Dream. I think African Americans, Hispanic Americans, can tell you that. Asian Americans, they still suffer

prejudice, it's still there, but less so, I think. It's there, together: the racism, the prejudice, and the American Dream live together. They're not separate things. You can have the mythic American Dream, in the sense that you can have all the physical bonanza that this system offers. But you also need to keep an eye on that racism, prejudice, because it'll destroy the mythic dream; it will destroy it and replace it. You try to deal with it in the best way you know how, and my thing is through art. You have this little voice, and you can channel it to do this, or to do that. I want to channel it to do some sort of meaningful statement.

Lady Day Brand, 1994



Negotiating the Art World

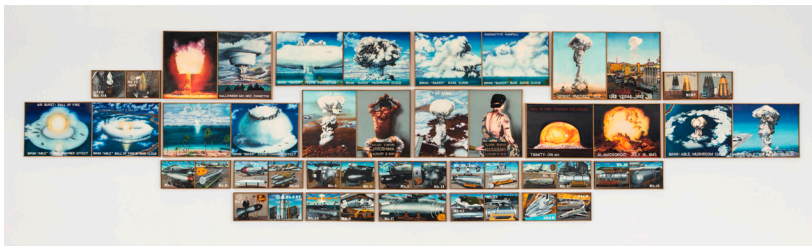
I was at UCLA [c. 1964] in graduate school and about ready to get my degree. I was invited by some of the teachers who belonged to Ceeje Gallery, which was on La Cienega Boulevard, to show my work to the two men there who ran that gallery, Jerry Jerome and Cecil Hedrick. I liked them. They seemed to like me, and they liked the work. It was a very comfortable relationship, it lasted for several years. And I tried to do what I thought was necessary to promote the gallery, because you're in an interdependent relationship. They need to sell the work. They have to pay the rent, and so your goal was to try to get as much work out there and get it sold, if possible. And that's what I did. And it was a workable relationship because they weren't pressuring me in any way; I felt very free there.

I would go to the openings and try to do my best, but I never felt comfortable in the gallery world. And I never felt comfortable with curators. I don't like to be around my work, and talk about it. It's just a personal thing; it has nothing to do with the system that exists. It's just that I don't feel comfortable there saying, "Hey, this is my work, and how great it is," or something to that effect, it just seemed uncomfortable. And so I tried to avoid it. I remember one time, at one of my openings: I was waiting outside. They used to have these big openings, with rock bands, and tons of food, and tons of wine, and showing movies... The gallery itself had two stories, and upstairs was their living quarters. At my openings, they were just packed. But I didn't want to go in there. And I remember I was sitting outside—they had a parking lot in the back—and I was reluctant to go in. And two of my friends, Barbara and Al Simon came by and said, "What are you doing out here? You're supposed to be in there." So they grabbed me and took me in. And once I'm in there, I'll do what I have to do, but I never felt like it was a natural thing for me. Once Ceeje closed in 1970, I never really sought out other galleries. But when you do the artwork, it needs to be promoted. I'm part of that world. I

want people to see it, and the only place you get shown is in the venues that exist.

Luckily, my wife Jan took it upon herself to say, “Look, this artwork has to be out there and be seen.” So she volunteered to do most of the support-work. Occasionally, if something has to be done, and other people depend on it, I’ll do it. But otherwise, I’d like to be independent. I don’t think I’m that unusual. I think authors are the same way. If you listen to a lot of them, they hate going around city to city to city, bookstore to bookstore to bookstore, and selling their work; but it’s part of the business, because the publisher and the editors and everyone depends on you. And some artists have to do it because they have huge—like Jeff Koons, he has a huge factory—they need to support those people. I don’t. If you let it, all your time will be spent promoting your work. That trade-off, for me, was too great, to spend half my time, or 70%. Jan took it over and I really appreciate that, because it frees my time to do the paintings. And people ask me, “Well, how long does it take you to do a piece?” Well, if I didn’t have Jan, it would take a lot longer, that’s for sure. Many people think, to have an art show, you just take a picture and hang it on the wall. You, at Bel Ami, and I, know differently. All the things that have to be done before, and during, and after the shows; Jan takes care of that. And that’s why she’s conducting this interview, which I feel more comfortable doing in this manner, this kind of recording.

Bombs, 1983



Looking at Art

I’ve always loved art history. I took every art history course they had at UCLA: I’m not kidding, I mean, Islamic art to Asian art to every Western art history course I could take. So, it’s something I still study; I’m learning about it still today, how this fits into society and what the place of art is. An analogy, if the art world is a global village. If you live in a village, you know all the nuances of it. Me, in the art world, and me in society-in-general, because of camp, I think, relocation camp, where I grew up, you never felt you were an American, exactly. You were always set a couple steps out of it, and were watching. And the same with the art world: although I’m part of it, you kind of sit at a distance and you look at it. You want to be able to still have that ability to perceive yourself within that context, and see that your values and your thinking are structured by that little village. And you don’t want to be so engrossed in that village, that you become a real part of it, I don’t think [laughs].

I hope I’m doing that, that I’m a little bit outside of it, and I look at it and say, “That’s really funny, how these two things can come together: how you can come to believe that you can can your shit, like Piero Manzoni, and call it art.” That’s interesting, don’t you think? Or a guy [Rudolph Schwarzkogler] can cut off his penis and you say, “Hey, that’s art.” If you don’t find that peculiar, then I’m sure you don’t find Jewish space-lasers that start forest fires peculiar as well. It’s that kind of thinking, that you say, “What... wait-a-minute... what’s, what’s going on here?” And, I’m sure that people that are in QAnon believe how they believe because they’ve been told certain things. And I maintain that happens in the art world—I’m part of it. So I’m not knocking it. It’s just that you should know it.

Because our values, whatever they are, are structured by this world around, and by what we come to believe is reality, or what we come to believe is art. And art is just one of those things that, like when the ukiyo-e artists, the floating world

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 acrylic on canvas, pine frame
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Ben Sakoguchi Biography

Lives and works in Pasadena, California

- 1938 Born in San Bernardino, California
 1956-58 San Bernardino Valley College, San Bernardino, California
 1960 BFA, University of California, Los Angeles
 1964 MFA, University of California, Los Angeles
 1982-83 California State University, Los Angeles
- 1964-97 Professor of Art, Pasadena City College, Pasadena, California

Solo exhibitions

- 2021 *Chinatown*, Bel Ami, Los Angeles
- 2020 *Ben Sakoguchi: Made in U.S.A.*, Ortuzar Projects, New York
- 2018 *Bombs*, POTTS, Alhambra, California
- 2016 *The Unauthorized History of Baseball in 100-odd Paintings: The Art of Ben Sakoguchi*, The Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles
- 2012 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings 1966–Present*, Cardwell Jimmerson Contemporary Art, Culver City, California
- 2003 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings*, Da Vinci Art Gallery, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles
- 2002 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings*, Da Vinci Art Gallery, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles
- 1999 *Ben Sakoguchi: Painted Works*, Luckman Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles
Postcards from Camp, Roberts Art Gallery, Santa Monica High School, Santa Monica, California
- 1998 *Souvenirs: Ben Sakoguchi 1978–1998*, El Camino College Art Gallery, Torrance, California
- 1995 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings*, Peppers Gallery, University of Redlands, Redlands, California

- 1995 *Ben Sakoguchi and Joe Soldate*, Space Gallery, Los Angeles
Under One Roof (with Jan Sakoguchi), Rancho Santiago College, Santa Ana, California
- 1992 *Artists of Conscience II: Ben Sakoguchi, Remember Me*, Alternative Museum, New York
Exhibition traveled to Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey
- 1988 *Ben Sakoguchi: Remember Me*, José Drudis-Biada Art Gallery, Mount Saint Mary's College, Los Angeles
- 1984 *Masami Teraoka and Ben Sakoguchi*, C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California, Davis, California
Ben Sakoguchi: Twenty Year Survey 1964–1984, Roberts Art Gallery, Santa Monica High School, Santa Monica, California
- 1983 *Ben Sakoguchi*, James Crumley Gallery, Mira Costa College, Oceanside, California
- 1981 *Ben Sakoguchi: Recent Work*, Da Vinci Art Gallery, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles
- 1980 *Ben Sakoguchi*, San Francisco Fine Arts Museum, Downtown Center, San Francisco, California
Philip Cornelius / Ben Sakoguchi, Aarnun Gallery, Pasadena, California
- 1978 *Douglas Bond, Ben Sakoguchi: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, Santa Ana College Art Gallery, Santa Ana, California
Ben Sakoguchi, Works, San Jose, California
- 1977 *Ben Sakoguchi: Art Exhibition*, Compton Community College Library, Compton, California
- 1973 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings & Etchings*, Zara Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1971 *Ben Sakoguchi*, Brand Library Art Center, Glendale, California
- 1968 *Ben Sakoguchi: Paintings and Etchings*, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California

Ben Sakoguchi, Da Vinci Art Gallery, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles

- 1967 *Ben Sakoguchi: Etchings*, Ceeje Gallery, New York
Ben Sakoguchi: Etchings and Philip Cornelius: Pots, Ceeje Gallery, Los Angeles
Ben Sakoguchi: Etchings, Cowell College Library, University of California, Santa Cruz, California
- 1966 *Ben Sakoguchi: Recent Oils*, Ceeje Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1965 *Ben Sakoguchi*, La Jolla Museum of Art, San Diego, California
- 1964 *Ben Sakoguchi: Recent Etchings*, Ceeje Gallery, Los Angeles

Selected group exhibitions

- 2018 *Somewhere in Between*, Kellogg Art Gallery, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, California
Collecting on the Edge, Part II, Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, Utah
- 2017 *One Year: The Art of Politics in Los Angeles*, Brand Library and Art Center, Glendale, California
Legacies, Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles
- 2012 *L.A. Raw: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945–1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy*, Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena, California
- 2011 *Drawing the Line: Japanese American Art, Design, and Activism in Postwar Los Angeles*, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles
Sub-Pop, Cardwell Jimmerson Contemporary Art, Culver City, California
- 2008 *Artist as Social Critic: Enrique Chagoya, Betye Saar, Roger Shimomura, and Ben Sakoguchi*, Schneider Museum of Art, Southern Oregon University, Ashland, Oregon

- 2006 *Winter Ball*, Da Vinci Art Gallery and Martin Luther King Jr. Library, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles
- 2005 *Ghosts of Little Boy: Artists for Peace*, National Japanese American Historical Society, San Francisco, California
- 2003 *In Their Own League: An Exhibition of Baseball Art*, Saddleback College Art Gallery, Mission Viejo, California
- 2001 *3rd International Biennial of Contemporary Art*, Fortezza da Basso, Florence, Italy
- 2000 *46th Biennial Exhibition: Media/Metaphor*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
The Big G Stands for Goodness: Corita Kent's 1960's Pop, Luckman Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles. Exhibition traveled to Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah; State University, Logan, Utah; Donna Beam Fine Arts Gallery, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada; UTSA Art Gallery, University of Texas, San Antonio, Texas; Beaver College Art Gallery, Glenside, Pennsylvania.
- 1999 *Resilient Images: Reflections On Internment*, National Japanese American Historical Society, San Francisco, California
- 1995 *Impressions of Nature*, Museum of Modern Art, New York
Latent August: The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, California
Made to Order: America's Most Wanted Painting, Alternative Museum, New York
50 Years, Human Re-Visions or The Nuclear Neighborhood, Peace Museum, Chicago, Illinois
- 1992 *10: Artist as Catalyst*, Alternative Museum, New York
- 1991 *Artists of Conscience: 16 Years of Social and Political Commentary*, Alternative Museum, New York
- 1990 *The Decade Show*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, and Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York

- 1989 *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, Alternative Museum, New York
A Different War: Vietnam in Art, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, Washington. Exhibition traveled to De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts; Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio; Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin; Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles; Colorado University Art Galleries, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado; Museum of Art, Washington State University, Pullman.
- 1986 *Five at the Towers*, Watts Towers Art Center, Los Angeles
- 1984 *Ceeje Revisited*, Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles
Crime and Punishment: Reflections of Violence in Contemporary Art, Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, California
- 1983 *The War Show*, Fine Arts Center Art Gallery, State University of New York, Stony Brook, New York
- 1982 *Visual Politics*, Alternative Museum, New York
The Atomic Salon, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York
- 1981 *Humor in Art*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Crimes of Compassion, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia
- 1979 *Recent Los Angeles Painting*, Lang Art Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont, California
The Artist as Social Critic, Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1978 *The Early Sixties at UCLA*, Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1973 *Askin-Finkelstein-Sakoguchi*, Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California
- 1971 *Graphics '71 : West Coast, U.S.A.*, University of Kentucky Art Gallery, Lexington, Kentucky. Exhibition traveled to Paducah Art Gallery, Paducah, Kentucky.

- 1968 *16th National Print Exhibition*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York
- 1965 *Art '65: Lesser Known and Unknown Painters, Young American Sculpture East to West*, American Express Pavilion, New York World's Fair, New York
- 1964 *Imprint*, Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena, California
- 1963 *19th National Exhibition of Prints*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

About the Authors

Lee Foley is a writer, curator and Director of Bel Ami, Los Angeles. She holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and a BFA in Art History, Theory and Criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Eli Diner is a critic, curator, and Executive Editor of *Cultured* magazine. Previously he served as Senior Editor of *Flash Art*. Diner is cofounder of Hakuna Matata, a sculpture garden in Los Angeles.

Ana Iwataki is a curator, writer, translator and organizer from and based in Los Angeles. She is Co-Editor of the forthcoming *X Topics* book series published by X Artists' Books and art consultant to the ACLU SoCal for the inaugural Artist-in-Residence program. She is active in multiple community organizations in Little Tokyo. She has curated exhibitions independently, as Associate Curator of the FLAX Foundation, in collaboration with Marion Vasseur Raluy, and as co-director of an independent exhibition space in Paris. She has recently contributed essays to the Recess Critical Writing program, *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, the *Baltic Triennial 13* catalogue, the *Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal*, among others. She is a PhD student in Comparative Media and Culture at the University of Southern California. She received a BA in Art History from Pitzer College, Claremont, CA, and an MA in Curatorial Studies from the Sorbonne, Paris, France.

Steven Wong is a Director and Senior Curator of the Vincent Price Art Museum, Monterey Park, CA. Previously, Wong has held positions as Curator at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and as Interim Executive Director and Senior Staff Curator at the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. Steven holds an MA in Asian American Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, and an MFA from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). He has lectured at UCSB and was an adjunct professor at Ventura College and Pasadena City College in Asian American Studies, History, and Art Studio Departments.

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709 N. Hill St.
inside Asian Center
upstairs suite #105
Los Angeles, CA 90012 USA
<http://belami.info/>