

## Painting Rejected From California Biennial Over Image of Swastika

Artist Ben Sakoguchi, who was imprisoned with his family in a Japanese internment camp, said his works are “a reminder of our history and of how far we still have to go as a society.”

by Matt Stromberg



Ben Sakoguchi, “Comparative Religions 101” (2014/2019), acrylic on canvas (all images courtesy the artist)

Los Angeles-based artist Ben Sakoguchi was among the 20 artists to be featured in the long-anticipated California Biennial, currently on view at the Orange County Museum of Art. But weeks before the opening, his painting “Comparative Religions 101” (2014/2019) was withdrawn from the exhibition — purportedly over its inclusion of the image of a swastika, *Los Angeles Magazine* reports.

The Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) officially opened its brand-new building this Saturday, October 8 after years of construction and decades of planning. A keystone of its revamped program is the return of the California Biennial, a survey of emerging artistic trends in the Golden State. This year's exhibition, curated by Elizabeth Armstrong, Gilbert Vicario, and Essence Harden, is titled *Pacific Gold* and features a diverse group of 19 artists who explore the complex and contested narratives and identities that shape Californian life.

Four days before the opening, Ben Sakoguchi posted an image of his multi-panel painting "Comparative Religions 101" along with a caption reading "SELECTED then REJECTED for the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art." On his website, the 85-year-old Japanese-American artist provides a thorough timeline of events, beginning with a January 12 invitation to participate in the biennial and a notification on June 24 that his painting would indeed be included in the exhibition. On August 19, however, a representative for the artist was told by OCMA's Chief Curator Courtenay Finn that the museum's Education Department had raised questions about the content of the painting, the timeline says. (Sakoguchi is famously reclusive and typically works on exhibitions through representatives. None of the biennial curators ever met him in person.)

According to Sakoguchi, the museum sent him a list of 17 questions to answer regarding his work and requested video clips of him speaking about different panels of the painting, all of which he complied with and are included on his website.

But on September 12, Sakoguchi was informed that the painting would not be included in the show "because the museum will not show any work that depicts a swastika," he wrote. (Hyperallergic found that at least one painting featuring swastikas was included in a past exhibition at the museum. Peter Saul's "Stalin in 1943" (2007) was part of the artist's 2008 retrospective, and depicts "[s]creaming bullets ripping gaping holes in the floating heads of helmeted Nazi soldiers," as Christopher Knight described in the *LA Times*.)

In response to Hyperallergic's request for comment, a representative for OCMA said: "Organizing the Biennial was an iterative process, with artworks being considered throughout the curatorial process, up until the opening. Ultimately the artist was not included in the exhibition." The museum declined to answer any follow-up questions.

In an email, Essence Harden, one of the exhibition’s curators, told Hyperallergic: “I wanted to affirm that the curatorial team for the biennial and the institution are two separate entities; the curatorial team is not staff but rather contractors for the exhibition. Ultimately, the institution had the final deciding power on what would be exhibited for *Pacific Gold*.”



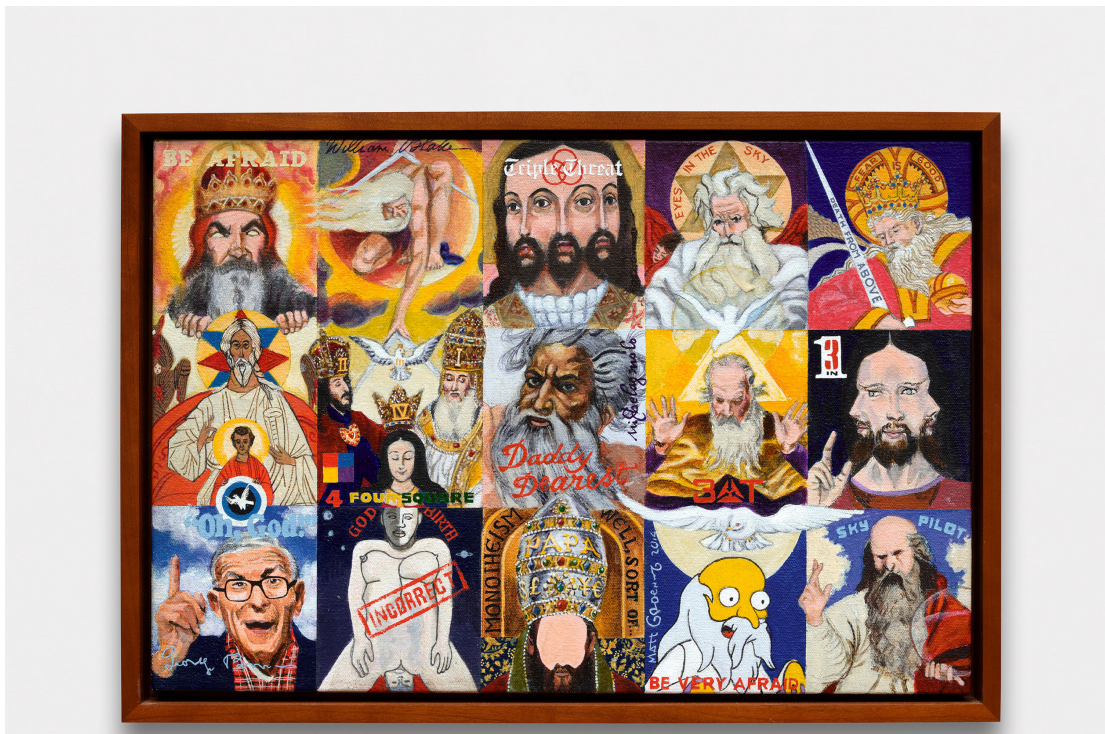
Ben Sakoguchi, “Comparative Religions 101” (detail) (2014/2019)

One of the 17 questions the museum asked Sakoguchi referred to his inclusion of “xenophobic, violent, and racist symbols, imagery and language.” “What are your thoughts on the current discourse around how the reproduction or continued representation of this imagery and language contributes to continued violence, harm, and/or negative stereotypes?” the museum asked.

“I’ve been on the receiving end of xenophobia and racism for most of my existence, and have lived through a long period of time where continued violence, harm and negative stereotypes were widely tolerated and swept under the rug,” the artist replied. “I favor selectively shining a light on the offending symbols, imagery, and language, both past and present, as a reminder of our history and of how far we still have to go as a society ... and of how vigilant we need to be.”

Sakoguchi, who was imprisoned with his family in a Japanese internment camp, is known for confronting complex, often uncomfortable themes in meticulously rendered paintings that draw on a range of visual source material. “Comparative Religions 101” is a classic Sakoguchi work in this respect,

grappling with religion, politics, identity, nationalism, spirituality, and false prophets with a mixture of satire and curiosity. The central panel depicts Albert Einstein seated amidst the majesty of the Grand Canyon, surrounded by smaller panels that mix and match religious, political, and sartorial motifs. One panel features several images of a God-like figure, including one by Michelangelo and another by Simpsons creator Matt Groening. In another, Rosie the Riveter is depicted wearing tefillin, small boxes housing verses of the Torah that religious Jews affix to their arms and head with leather straps during prayer.



Ben Sakoguchi, "Comparative Religions 101" (detail) (2014/2019)

Swastikas appear at least twice in the work, both in the historical context of World War II. In one panel, a Nazi flag can be seen behind an image of Japanese Emperor Hirohito; in another, the flag is visible next to Sikh soldiers in the "Free Indian Legion," an Indian military unit allied with Germany composed largely of prisoners of war, as Sakoguchi explains in one of the videos he filmed for OCMA.

Jackie T. Kennedy, a representative for the artist, told Hyperallergic that she was notified by the guest curators themselves that the work could not be included because it contained a swastika. Sakoguchi was not interested in offering other paintings for the exhibition.

"At that point Ben was done, trust had been broken, the museum had clearly shown they couldn't handle his work," Kennedy told Hyperallergic. "Ben had also already put so much effort into making the recordings and answering the museum's questions, and wanted to get back to painting."



Ben Sakoguchi, "Comparative Religions 101" (detail) (2014/2019)



Ben Sakoguchi, "Comparative Religions 101" (detail) (2014/2019)

According to Lee Foley, a director of LA's Bel Ami Gallery, which has worked with Sakoguchi for the past three years, curators Armstrong and Vicario called her on September 19 to ask if she "could facilitate the loan of a work from a private collection, and possibly include Ben Sakoguchi without involving him."

“I said I could not facilitate the loan of a work without the approval of the artist, respecting his wish to not participate in the biennial,” Foley told Hyperallergic.

The following day, the curators emailed Sakoguchi through the gallery, imploring him to reconsider participating.



Ben Sakoguchi, “Comparative Religions 101” (detail) (2014/2019)

“Your work needs to assert its rightful place within the biennial as a reminder that communities of color are the social and economic backbone of this country and of California, in particular,” reads a section of the email, which was reviewed by Hyperallergic. “Your participation in the biennial is a radical act of cultural resistance and we need your artistic voice to state loudly and clearly that we will not cower to right wing political agendas that are attempting to culturally whitewash our histories and our truths.”

According to Foley and Kennedy, the museum backpedaled on its withdrawal of the work, making a last-minute offer to include “Comparative Religions 101,” but Sakoguchi declined. (A representative for OCMA reached by Hyperallergic declined to comment on this, or on Foley’s claim that the museum sought the loan of a work without the artist’s approval.)



Ben Sakoguchi, "Comparative Religions 101" (detail) (2014/2019)

"I thought the mere fact that they would ask him all those questions was embarrassing," said Raul Guerrero, the 77-year-old Mexican-American artist also included in the Biennial whose paintings take a similarly irreverent approach to history and identity.

"He was good enough to answer. I would have said, 'fuck no,'" Guerrero told Hyperallergic. "In some respects though, it's fortunate for us ... In the process of reading what he wrote, and the slideshows, it further increases my respect for the man. I think he's brilliant. It's a primer for a post-conceptual approach to creating."

Although Sakoguchi declined to speak with Hyperallergic, his response to the museum's last question highlights the perspective his work could have brought to the Biennial.

"When discussing my artwork, I've long held that I have no answers, just questions. I hope that audiences will recognize some of the questions in 'Comparative Religions 101,' and will posit their own, as well."