

Painting “Selected and Rejected” From California Biennial Over Swastika

Ben Sakoguchi’s 16-panel piece “Comparative Religions 101” uses the ancient and cultural symbol in a historical context

By Michael Slenske - October 7, 2022



Ben Sakoguchi’s “Comparative Religions 101”

On Saturday, a crowd of some 400 artists, curators, collectors, and museum donors clad in “Utopian black tie” attire—as per the request of the Orange County Museum of Art—swanned about a swank gala previewing the institution’s new \$94 million, Morphosis-designed building. By all accounts, it was a cause for celebration, as the museum had just opened its newly reinstated California Biennial with a presentation titled *Pacific Gold*.

Billed as an exhibition that was “revisiting mythical stories and reimagining California as a changing land, the *California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold* presents a set of distinctive voices, ones which question, challenge, and animate the past while looking to the future,” it seemed to be capturing the zeitgeist in the Golden State art scene. The curators visited more than 100 artist studios and selected a diverse roster of 20 California artists, including rising (and long-established) L.A. talents like Alicia Piller, Simphiwe Ndzube, Sharon Ellis, and Ben Sakoguchi.

Well, maybe not Sakoguchi.

The 84-year-old, San Bernardino-born and Pasadena-based Sakoguchi was looking forward to having his totemic painting, *Comparative Religions 101*—a 16-panel work made between 2014 and 2019—included in the biennial. So were the curators, who selected it early on in their process and were by all accounts very pleased with the artist’s commitment. In fact, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Gilbert Vicario said, “I find [*Comparative Religions 101*] powerful because he’s an artist who has been at this for about 40 years who has a visual literacy and ability to illustrate his particular view of the world through this format. It’s very satirical—in a way, it reminds me of part *Mad* magazine and part political cartoons. You get an immediate visceral reaction. It’s completely present and of the moment and unlike anything we saw.”

Despite the effusive praise by Vicario, who told the paper it was the work that most moved him in the exhibition, *Comparative Religions 101* was actually rejected by the museum on September 12 and never displayed. This came as somewhat of a shock to Sakoguchi, who took to social media on three separate occasions this week with a post stating: “SELECTED and REJECTED for the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art.”

Comparative Religions 101 [can be seen in detail on Sakoguchi’s website.](#)

In this 18-page document (with audio, video, and written responses), Sakoguchi very explicitly lays out when he was invited to be one of the participating artists in the Biennial on January 12 through his notification that *Comparative Religions 101* was selected early in the summer and when he learned that “questions have been raised about content” of the work in mid-August. This led to the museum requesting audio/video responses to their 17 questions about the work shortly thereafter and he replied over the next several weeks. He was notified of the rejection on September 12 on the grounds that, as he states on his website, “the museum will not show any work that depicts a swastika.” All of this happened after he supplied written answers but before he was given enough time to edit his audio/video responses.

When asked about this decision through a representative, the museum simply responded: “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.”

Now, anyone who is familiar with Sakoguchi’s oeuvre, as the curators certainly would be, knows that his work is polemic, ironical, satirical, and widely accepted (and acclaimed) for being so. He’s best known for his *Orange Crate Labels* paintings, an ongoing project which he began in the mid-70s; 27 of these were shown to acclaim by the Chinatown-based gallery Bel Ami in 2021. The shoebox-sized panels send up the illustrated commercials Sakoguchi regularly saw on the crates in his parents’ San Bernardino Valley grocery. In the deployment of archival ad motifs they take on real Nazis and surf Nazis, hate crimes, blood diamonds, and the racist, sexist expectations placed on Asian women.

One would assume that knowing his work and personal history—Sakoguchi is a Japanese-American who was incarcerated with his family at the Poston Internment Camp in Arizona during World War II—that there is more than a little irony in pulling this bait and switch over a parodical image of a swastika.

But let’s examine the work further. The centerpiece is a panel depicting the Grand Canyon flooded with a sublime sunset, a rainbow arching over what one presumes is Havasupai Falls, and Albert Einstein in Cabana Wear relaxing on a bluff. Einstein’s visit was real—the shorts were a cheeky twist by the artist—but it places the Nobel laureate in a landscape seemingly as vast as the one his theories helped explain (regardless of his athleisure choices).

“I came across a photograph of Albert Einstein at the Grand Canyon and wondered what someone with that type of mind, and knowledge about the vastness of the universe, would be thinking as they looked

out across that landscape,” Sakoguchi wrote.

That center panel is surrounded by 14 other panels—one questions our depictions of gods (from a wrathful Old Testament father to George Burns to a Simpsons character) while another teases out the varying shapes and physical conditions of Buddha. Monument worship is put on blast in another panel depicting everything from Christ the Redeemer to Seward Johnson’s much-reviled “Forever Marilyn” sculpture, which now resides in Palm Springs. The purportedly controversial “Shinto” panel depicts a “Shinto God,” “Samurai God,” “Lesser God,” and a “DemiGod” over the caption “Shinto Unlike Other Religions, Can’t Thrive Outside of Japan” because “the religion was created to justify [Hirohito’s] existence,” says Sakoguchi in one of his videos. “Japan had 3000 years of the same family, so like most royalty...they claimed being chosen by god to be their emperor.” The swastika in question appears in the “Samurai God” segment of the panel on a flag waving behind a Japanese flag. Hirohito stands in full regalia in the foreground with a cartoonish Samurai at his backside.

The use of the swastika in this context is merely historical and employed as a device to align the atrocities of Japan during the war with those of Nazi Germany. Clearly, the curators did not find this offensive, anti-Semitic, or even in bad taste. They would surely know the historical origins of the swastika, which originated in Eurasia some 7,000 years ago and was used in ancient religions for centuries before the Nazis and Hitler co-opted it as a hate symbol. If they were unaware, he provided an illustration showing 16 different pre-Nazi swastikas.

At a moment when anti-Asian attacks have [seen a rapid rise in Orange County](#), the museum might want to ask itself why it’s censoring an artist who has devoted his life’s work to indexing such injustices and hate crimes (even those of his Japanese countrymen when they were allies of the Nazis during World War II). Or its leadership might just want to listen to Sakoguchi’s answer to their 11th question.

“Some of the visual elements and language in your work can be read as provocative and even inflammatory for the general public. How might you advise the museum to address an audience member who is uncomfortable, upset, triggered, or angry as a reaction to some of the language and/or imagery in your work? the museum asks.

“I have no advice for the museum in that regard,” wrote Sakoguchi. “I’ve never believed my role as an artist was to make work that ensured comfort. My paintings are purposefully subject to alternate interpretations, and a reading of *Comparative Religions 101* that provokes anger is certainly possible if the viewer is a literalist. But I can’t explain the humor and irony in the work to a literalist, any more than I can explain red to a person who is (red/green) colorblind.”

OCMA representatives declined to answer LAMag’s questions regarding the rejection of the work after it had been accepted into the biennial; Sakoguchi, when contacted for additional comment, referred the magazine to his website, where he outlined the timeline of the whole process and published his answers to the museum’s questions.

Pacific Gold was organized by former OCMA curator Elizabeth Armstrong; Essence Harden, Visual Arts Curator at the California African American Museum; and Gilbert Vicario, Chief Curator at Pérez Art Museum Miami.