

An Obscure Miracle of Connection

Curated by Noor Bhangu



5 JANUARY - 2 FEBRUARY
Curator's Tour: 11 January,
12:30pm

Funeral, 1973. Copper etching and woodcut on arches, 22/100. Collection of the School of Art.

Artist's Biography

Noboru Sawai was born as the third child of Tanioka and Iwa Sawai in the city of Takamatsu in 1931. At the age of fourteen, he was one of 200 Japanese students to be recruited by an airplane manufacturing factory in Manchuria. However, the opportunity for work and training was cut short with the arrival of the Russian army, then, followed by Mao Tse'Tung's army, which effectively imprisoned the group of young students in a concentration camp. After being liberated by a U.S. troop carrier, and brought back to Japan, Sawai began working as a cook's assistant at the U.S. military headquarters while learning English at night school. His class was led by the Lutheran, Wesley Priebe, who used this opportunity to educate the Japanese about Christianity.

It was Sawai's curiosity about Christianity that encouraged Priebe to write to the Lutheran Bible Institute in Minnesota to inquire about a scholarship. In 1950, Sawai obtained the scholarship to travel to Minneapolis and begin his studies. Within the year he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which confined him to a sanatorium for the next nine years. Following his recovery, he returned to Minneapolis to finish his undergraduate and graduate degrees in Fine Arts.

In the years after his graduation, Sawai struggled to find a teaching job in America; instead, he used the time to return to Japan with his young family and study woodblock printmaking techniques from Toshi Yoshada. Upon his return, he was invited to teach at Berea College in Kentucky, where he first began researching the combination for woodblock and intaglio techniques. Sawai's exploration and expertise in these two divergent techniques eventually "gain[ed] him a position among the finest print artists in Canada."

In 1971, Sawai moved to Canada to take up the offer of teaching printmaking and drawing at the University of Calgary, where he remained until his retirement. Through the institution's support, he was funded to travel and exhibit extensively in Canada and abroad. For his innovative use of woodblock printing, Sawai was, also, invited to share his skills with Inuit communities in Cape Dorset and Baker Lake. On April 23, 2016 Noboru Sawai passed away at the age of 85 in Vancouver.

An essay

An Obscure Miracle of Connection explores select works by the Japanese-Canadian printmaker, Noboru Sawai, to study the materialization of diaspora in a Canadian art historical context. While it is an increasingly tricky term to pin down, one way to define diaspora is through its linkage with "displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile."¹ In her extension of this broad definition, Lily Cho offers an understanding that locates "histories of loss" alongside displacement.² Noboru Sawai was an individual, so marked by histories of loss and displacement. His movement from his homeland Japan to America, and then to Canada together with his negotiation of diverse cultures should be read through a diasporic lens to excavate for the impact of such losses on his artistic career. This exhibition sets out to understand the nuances of diaspora enacted in Noboru Sawai's work and, more specifically, the ways in which loss was in turn – and in time – countered by a gregarious accumulation of various art histories and cultures. The works included in this exhibition are: *Our Cultural Heritage* (1972), *Funeral* (1973), *Great Tribunal* (1974), *In the Garden* (date unknown), and *Leda and the Swan* (1980).

The title of this exhibition comes out of Edward Kamau Braithwaite's paper, *The African Presence in the Caribbean Literature*, which entered my research by way of reading David Scott and Lily Cho. In particular, Cho adopts the phrase, "an obscure miracle of connection," in her own work to signify the coming together of "communities which are not quite nation, not quite race, not quite religion, not quite homesickness."³ She argues that there linger points of connection between diasporic communities, which must be charted "without losing sight of the specificities of these various and varying communities and movements."⁴ At first sight, the print-based work of Noboru Sawai presents itself as an ambivalent archive of various known images: late European salon interiors, floating world imagery from Ukiyo-e prints, and intimate Kama Sutra postures among others. But upon closer reflection, it is obvious that the imagery is not flung on the page in a fit of overzealous consumption; rather ethical borders are maintained between each individual compartment through the artist's skill in printmaking technologies. The works, then, become translations of the potential of crossed histories and crossed cultures to flourish together without giving up their differences.

Sawai's work, *Our Cultural Heritage*, offers an exercise in understanding key differences and challenges within art history. On the left side of the artwork, two

female figures sit perched, breasts uncovered, while their male counterparts point to a print of a Japanese couple locked in union. This print is an appropriation of one produced by the Japanese printmaker, Hokusai, whose erotic pictures continue to be far less circulated than his ruminations on seascapes and landscapes.⁵ Sawai uses the technology of woodblock and intaglio printmaking in concert with a strong juxtaposition of colours to animate the differences between the two cultural moments. But subtler than the difference in techniques and colour is the delicate embossing of the paper around the edges of Hokusai's image, which, ultimately, works to emphasize the spatial and temporal difference between the two scenes. In his formative years as a student in Minneapolis, Sawai began to study art history to draw out its unique moments and chart the points of connection within different cultures. This image is, perhaps, a creative response to the artist's years of formal study.

The loud, yet barely visible, separation between the two scenes in *Our Cultural Heritage* prompts a return to fin-de-siècle Europe when the woodblock prints of Hokusai and his contemporaries began to enter European fairs and markets – starting with the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867.⁶ At that particular moment, Japanese ukiyo-e prints, translated to "images from the floating world," were favoured by many artists – Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Mary Cassatt to name a few – for their flattened visuals and their unabashed exploration of the erotic. Sawai places the European figures in a private drawing room to comment on the ways in which these objects served, and continue to serve, purposes of titillation for their collectors. The men's gesture towards the erotic print in concert with the women's undressing reads like the group's slippage into the base, animal nature of the Japanese couple, further mimicked by two muskrats engaged in similar activity in the foreground of the image.⁷

In an exhibition tour of Noboru Sawai's two-person show with Pat Martin Bates at the Winchester Galleries in Toronto, the tour guide Peter Redpath paused in front of Sawai's *Antique Bird Cage* to offer this: "It's mildly erotic, nothing that would upset anybody I'm sure."⁸ The Japanese-Canadian printmaker's work may have seemed untroubling and altogether mild in the 2009 exhibition but I wonder if it takes into account the contexts that gave shape to Sawai's work, because in his early lifetime he was subject to ongoing critique and censorship. The first instance of censorship transpired at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1974 with the removal of the print, *Honourable Curator*, from a group exhibition. The second and

third instances occurred in Japan. At an annual exhibition with the Japanese Printmaking Association at the Ueno National Museum in Tokyo, Sawai's print was removed and the association was threatened with a two million yen fine if the work was exhibited again. Following this incident, the Mitake Gallery was asked to pull the artist's solo show in Tokyo.⁹ Instead of cancelling, the artist and gallerist decided to open the exhibition quietly a few hours earlier with multiple viewer advisories strewn across the prints.¹⁰ Decades later, Redpath's casual softening of the erotic in Sawai's work is concerning in that it abandons the context which originally propelled the artist to create such work.

In the exhibition catalogue for Sawai's 1994 solo show, *A Garden of Delights: 25 Years of Prints by Noboru Sawai*, the curator, Katherine Ylitalo helpfully clarifies, "Although erotic art represents sex, it is not only about sex; it also indicates the current context of social values and political power."¹¹ For Sawai, the exploration of the erotic was more than a representation of bodies engaged in sexual encounter. Indeed, it began with a return to erotic themes in the work of old masters – Rembrandt, Daumier, Hokusai, Man Ray and Picasso – and a desire to understand why erotic-based works were marginalized in art history.¹²

The artist's use of erotic imagery becomes a diasporic retooling that frustrates the hegemonic structure of inherited art histories. In *Funeral*, Sawai returns to the setting of Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849-50). Standing at 10 x 20 feet, Courbet's work played on the monumentality of history paintings by attempting to record the lives and rituals of his hometown and its middleclass inhabitants. Upon exhibition, the work garnered criticism from critics owing to the artist's use of visual fragmentation and crude brushwork to highlight the unique likeness of each sitter in favour of depicting a scene of spiritual contemplation that would have been fitting for the sombre theme of a country burial.¹³ Wanting to include the controversy of the painting within his own studied appropriation of the work, the controversy of the painting within his own studied appropriation of the work, Sawai playfully re-inserted the critics' expectations. He used the technique of intaglio printmaking to flatten and, thus, erase the individuated characters while working with woodcut in the now-extended sky to re-insert the spiritual element, filled in by the portrayal of the Hindu gods, Radha and Shiva in celestial consummation. Sawai's juxtaposition of these two separate visual containers illuminates both the lack and presence of the erotic in art history.

As *A Burial at Ornans* reveals, Sawai was working across a great number of visual cultures to resurrect scenes of sexual coupling. Beyond Western and Japanese art history, there was also the Indian – Hindu religious imagery and the Ancient Vedic. One of Sawai’s smaller works, *In the Garden*, is a woodblock print that commemorates a scene from Ancient India’s sexual epic, *Kama Sutra*. Two bodies are – again – bound together in consummation in a scene that appears to be both within and without time. Each consort’s body adornment and the architecture outlining their figures can be traced to the Mughal era – a time in Indian history when the majority of the subcontinent was under the Islamic rule of the Mughal Empire. At this time, Indian artists were negotiating between the aesthetics of Persian miniatures, transferred into the country by the Mughals and their networks, and the local Indian aesthetics.¹⁴ In their act of balancing between the somewhat-global and the local, the artists began to merge the boundaries between the two to create works that resembled Sawai’s *In the Garden*, where everything from the skin colour of the sitters to the architectural detail of the scene are Persian but the subject matter is resolutely unique in its localization. Sawai’s keen interest in unearthing the erotic across and within specific art histories evokes his faculty in stepping out of his own moment that is best understood through a turn to diaspora.

Briefly leaving the erotic behind, I feel that it may be important to contextualize Sawai’s location in and identification with diaspora, which alongside the erotic is a precarious subject in our society. Let’s begin with the question: what does it mean to occupy space and time in diaspora? In his paper, *The Migrant’s Time*, Ranajit Guha explores some of the implications of living in diaspora. Beginning with a distinction of the diasporic subject not as an alien in the foreign land but as an apostate, who by leaving the homeland has become “unfaithful” to it, Guha characterizes the diasporic experience as one that is marked by sacrosanctity and discontinuity.¹⁵ Examining Sawai’s counterprint methodology in light of this idea, we can begin to understand some of his motivations behind producing work that continues to stand apart in the lexicon of Canadian print-based arts.

When he was hired for the position of lecturer at Berea College in Kentucky, part of Sawai’s funding was dependant on him experimenting with woodblock and intaglio techniques in order to develop a sustainable method of combining them.¹⁶ The artist’s experimentation with the medium of woodblock printing, first developed in seventh century China and so closely embedded in the history of modern Japanese art, betrays a willingness to part with the homeland that Guha asserts is common to migrants lost in the second world of diaspora.¹⁷ The loss is managed by finding “matching coordinates” in the new home, which for the Japanese-born artist were techniques of intaglio, traced to fifteenth century European metalcraft workers.¹⁸ Despite

his investment in the experimentation with the techniques of woodblock printing and intaglio, or alternatively home and diaspora, Sawai never felt he had gotten it quite right. This continued effort to negotiate and counterprint these two methods symbolizes the diasporic experience as always locked in a struggle to be settled. All the prints presented in this exhibition, except possibly *In the Garden*, were produced after Sawai’s highly-experimental period in Kentucky and, so, appear more technically cogent while remaining aloof on the resolution of settlement for the artist or the viewer.



Great Tribunal, 1974. Copper etching and woodcut on arches, 23/100. Collection of the School of Art.

Great Tribunal, is part of a series entitled, “Tribute to the Old Masters,” in which the artist employs the method of compartmentalization, or what was once known as the art of pictures-within-pictures. Catherine Roach writes that within the context of nineteenth century Britain, pictures-within-pictures were adopted from an earlier Dutch style to function as an artist’s resumé for prospective clients. Firstly, a scene like a salon full of classics – everything from the great artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael – indicated that the artist had received a formal arts training abroad and/or was an expert on the general survey of art history. Secondly, the rendition of the works in fine detail was a way to prove technical proficiency.¹⁹ Like these nineteenth century artworks, Sawai’s print is both a resumé of his knowledge of art history as well as his command of printmaking. *Great Tribunal* features a salon full of anonymous figures mingling against the backdrop of countless paintings and sculptures rescued from the vaults of the artist’s personal life and art history. Ylitalo identified the figures in the principal image in the background as Sawai’s friend, the artist John Will, dressed as a maharaja with a fictional child bride at his side.²⁰ Amongst the other works, there are some obvious hints of William Hogarth, Michelangelo, and Pablo Picasso. In the foreground, Sawai prominently featured an erotic scene from the floating world, appropriated from Hokusai’s oeuvre. Positioned like a traveler’s stamp on a full room of activity, it exposes diaspora’s ongoing feelings of unsettlement, and

the “failure of one culture to slot smoothly into another.”²¹ The background is produced in dull colours through intaglio to outline the frenzied participants and objects of art history, while the foreground is presented in full colour through woodblock printmaking. Ylitalo credits this loud contrast as a proof of the artist’s preference for his Japanese heritage, which although dimmed by his guilt of being an dishonest fugitive of his homeland, continued to colour his work.

Finally, in looking at Sawai’s *Leda and Bird*, we can witness the re-bonding of diaspora with notions of cultural exchange and hybridity to engage with elements from the new home. In all of his work, Sawai moved beyond the edges of his own cultural enclave – that of a Japanese immigrant – into the space of the cultural other. In Canada, this movement was further supported through opportunities to teach Inuit printmakers in Cape Dorset and Baker Lake about printmaking alternatives to stone cutting.²² *Leda and Bird* was created following the artist’s return from the first of these trips. Produced nearly a decade after the larger works presented in this exhibition, the print of the non-consensual encounter between Leda and Zeus (disguised as a swan) is extracted from Greek mythology. If we, momentarily, overlook the artist’s valorization of a rape scene, we can appreciate the significance of the print in the artist’s career as it signals the development of “subtle sensuality and lyricism” after his frenzied period of cramming multiples erotic scenes in each of his prints.²³ This adventure in softness may have been a result of cross-cultural fertilization with the Inuit printmakers. The small woodblock print was later incorporated into a larger print, *Sea Gulls* (1985), which was part of Sawai’s self-appointed project to introduce eroticism to Inuit and indigenous visual culture, a mission which remains misplaced at best.

In the past few years, some of us – including myself – have become weary of naming diasporicness in others in fear that it has become a sort of currency that, when used uncritically, allows easy passage into trendy discourses on power, movement, and the global that undermine critical explorations of the nuanced field. However, our fear is matched by a desire to affirm diaspora as an authentic way of being in the world that, indeed, brings us closer to understanding the complex nature of living in a globalizing world. This study is an act of affirming diaspora in the work of Noboru Sawai in order to avoid tendencies, such as Peter Redpath’s that divorce artists from the very cultural and historical landscapes in which they produced their work. In looking at Sawai’s work today, it is essential to acknowledge the ways in which he was a diasporic subject of his time so we can understand his work and its contribution to Canadian art history. *An Obscure Miracle of Connection* charts one artist’s destabilization and incorporation of diverse histories while working through the knot of cross-cultural connection to, ultimately, ask: how does one resolve difference in flux of the diasporic universe?

Endnotes

- Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. “Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Connection in Diaspora Studies.” In *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*. Edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Keyworks in Cultural Studies, 6. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003. p. 1.
- Lily Cho. “The Turn to Diaspora.” *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, (Spring 2007): 11-30. p. 12.
- Ibid., p. 13.
- Ibid.
- Hokusai’s print is based on an eighteenth century print by an anonymous artist.
- Klaus Berger. *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. p. 66.
- The transmission of Japanese art and other “exotic” art in Europe, also, aided in furthering debates on cultural and biological degeneration, in which specific races of human beings were placed within a hierarchy. These debates, eventually, culminated in modern Eugenics movements. See: Childs, Donald J. *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- “Noboru Sawai and Pat Martin Bates at Winchester Galleries.” April 16, 2009. Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN8knkRAMz8>.
- Katherine Ylitalo. *A Garden of Delights: 25 Years of Prints by Noboru Sawai*. Calgary: Nickle Arts Museum, 1994. p. 15-16.
- Police and TV media crews arrived to moderate and televise the controversial event. In spite of the censorship, or because of it, all of Sawai’s prints sold out within hours of opening.
- Ylitalo. *A Garden of Delights*. p. 18.
- Ibid., p. 8.
- Lauren S. Weingarden. “Imaging and Imagining the French Peasant: Gustave Courbet and Rural Physiologies.” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 1-40. p. 12.
- Gregory Minissale. *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India, 1550-1750*. 2nd Ed. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. p. 106.
- Ranjit Guha. “The Migrant’s Time.” *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 155-60.
- Ylitalo. *A Garden of Delights*. p. 12-13.
- “Relief Printing.” Rice-Paper. Accessed January 03, 2018. <http://www.rice-paper.com/uses/printing.html>.
- John Ross, Clare Romano, Tim Ross. *The Complete Printmaker: Techniques, Traditions, Innovations*. Rev. and Expanded ed. New York: Free Press, 1990. p. 65.
- Catherine Roach. *Pictures-Within-Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Studies in Art Historiography. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. p. 3
- Ylitalo. *A Garden of Delights*. p. 17.
- Guha
- Ibid., p. 24.
- Ibid., p. 23.

Bibliography

- “Noboru Sawai and Pat Martin Bates at Winchester Galleries.” April 16, 2009. Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN8knkRAMz8>.
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- Ylitalo, Katherine. *A Garden of Delights: 25 Years of Prints by Noboru Sawai*. Calgary: Nickle Arts Museum, 1994.