Mine Okubo, Artist

Thesis: Japanese American artist, Mine Okubo, used art to combat her detrimental experience from World War II Evacuation.

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As I said before, this is a fascinating paper, with a very good job of research. May one major criticism is that you might have drawn some wider conclusions from the life of Mine — what is life in America like for the creative non-Caucasian woman? How do Mine's accomplishments differ from those of other American women artists?

Mina Okabe, Japanese American artist, was born 1912 in Riverside, California. She grew up in Riverside and began to pursue her goal as artist there. She was doing mosaics and murals in northern California when her work was cut short by the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent evacuation of 110,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast (American Experience, 1972).

During camp, at both the relocation center and at Tule Lake, Mina taught art classes and continued to paint. However, her most memorable work from this period came from two thousand ink sketches she made while in camp. Two hundred of these were later compiled in her book, Citizen 13660, which was published in 1946 giving her national recognition (Citizen 13660, 1946; Experience, 1972).

Mina's early years were ordinary childhood ones. Her version is something like this:

I was the middle child of a large family of seven— and jokingly she adds—a misfit. Our family was always poor. Dad was a gardener. Mainly because of the influence of my mother, three in my family including me became artists (Experience, 1972). Who is saying this? Is it an interview?

Her mother, painter and calligrapher, always encouraged her art work. Mine's mother came to the United States in 1902 for the St. Louis Exposition of Arts and Crafts.
She was from an artist's family and a Honor Graduate of Tokyo Art Institute. Mine recalls:

"...When the kids came, Oma had to give up everything. When I was little, I used to follow her around with paints and brushes. Oma encouraged me from the beginning. Seeing her trying to carry on with painting along with having to bring up a large family, seeing her futile struggle helped me to be determined and to achieve the thing I want to do most—paint. (Excellence, 1972, p. 12).

Very shy as a young girl, her interest in art helped.

She became art editor at Riverside Junior College. From Riverside she was encouraged by a teacher to go to Berkeley rather than UCLA for the better training there.

Mine found Berkeley a valuable experience.

"...I met many interesting artists, and people and all the professors. I had to work at all sorts of odd jobs to make a living. I worked as a tutor, seamstress, and housemaid. I waited on tables and even worked in the fields. You sure learn a lot more that way. My schooling has always been outside the classroom. (Excellence, 1972, p. 12).

During this period at Berkeley she studied fresco painting under Professor John Halsey who was interested in the old methods of fresco painting, dating back to Renaissance and pre-Renaissance times. Mine received training in the old process of fresco painting, including how to grind colors and mix glue. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Berkeley in 1933, and her Master of Arts degree in 1936 (Excellence, 1972).

At this time she produced a series of paintings which could be called "the artist as a young woman." Among her most beautiful paintings can be included: MOTHER AND CAT, BROTHER, and CHURCH. These paintings can be noted for their serene outlook, one free from politics, war or the..."
outside world (Experience, 1972). The fat, contented cat e.g. in MOTHER AND CAT is used frequently in Mine's work. It shows up often in her paintings—"its lonesome domesticity metamorphosed into a singing, dancing and prancing cat—the perennial blithe spirit" (Experience, 1972, p. 13). The chunky style in the painting could have been influenced by Bay Area artists she knew at the time; however, the lyrical style is hers (Experience, 1972).

"An uncle of Mine's had spent much of his time in Paris. He was Kendro Kato, an artist, who lived and dreamt art. He found Paris ideal for an artist and often mentioned in his letters to Mine's mother the beauty of the Paris boulevards, the interesting people, the friendly cafes and the fascination of the city itself" (Experience, 1972, p. 16). Seeing how her mother so greatly admired and spoke of this man's art work, Mine had hoped to see Paris one day and meet him. However, he died before she got her chance to visit Europe. (Experience, 1972).

In 1939, Mine won the Bertha Taussig Traveling Scholarship, University of California's highest art honor. Remember Mine. "It wasn't a very big scholarship, so I really rucked it. I went on a freighter and stayed at youth hostels. I traveled alone, going by foot and bicycle, all over England, Italy, Sicily, Austria, France, etc" (Experience, 1972, p. 16).

The European experience (1939-40) influenced Mine's art work in a dramatic way. Bright bold colors appear for the first time... It is in Europe she discovered color, light and air: e.g. Florence is blue, Paris is green..."
expressively, her colors in FISHERMAN create a dazzling contrast between white of sand and blue sea. Her use of color leaps and dances at you, the brush lines both in the fishermen and their boats are bold and carefree (Experience, 1972).

In FUNERAL PROCESSION, she expresses movement and freedom in the wind and stormy sky. Again she creates a mood with bold brushwork. Her work during this period reflects a general awareness of the world outside her family plus a receptive and highly impressionable state of mind. Unfortunately her trip was cut short by the outbreak of World War II (Experience, 1972).

As the time she was still traveling in Europe as

When England and France declared war on September 3, 1939, "I had been travelling in Europe a year on an art fellowship from the University of California. I was stranded in Switzerland with nothing but a toothbrush. Everything that I owned was in Paris. The train fare from Budapest to Berne took my last cent and the money I had expected had not arrived at the American Express Office. Mail service was suspended and the French border was closed ([p. 3]).

Luckily, she had friends living near Berne. She stayed with different families, finally ending up at a farm. As the war worsened, friends urged her to go back to the United States. She decided to return as soon as she received word that her mother was ill. With boat passage through France secured, she traveled home listening to stories told by the boat load of refugees. Upon arrival her joy was cut short by the news of her mother's death (Citizen 13669, 1946).
More than moved in with a younger brother in the Bay Area. Upon her return she began working for the Federal Arts Project, part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, which gave commissions to artists for large monumental works during the 1930's Depression (Experiences, 1972).

At the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island, in 1939, she demonstrated fresco painting at the same site where Diego Rivera was working on his enormous 1832 square foot mural glorifying the theme of Pan-American Unity. Remember Mine, "Diego was high up there working on the scaffold, while I was down below, near the bottom demonstrating and answering questions of the spectators," Because she looks more Latin than Japanese she said, "People thought I was Diego's sixth child by a third marriage!" (Experiences, 1972, p. 19).

At the time of Pearl Harbor, Mine had been working on Mosaics for the Oakland Hospitality House. Eager to finish her work, she did not leave the area until mandatory evacuation started. Then she was evacuated with her brother. Said Mine on those evacuation years of 1942-44:

We lost Mama before the evacuation. Dad belonged to a local church after Mama died. He was very active. The government didn't trust any Japs who were active in the community. They came and took him away to a camp in Missoula, Montana and still later shipped him to Louisiana. The Missoula camp was reserved for those Japs who the government suspected of being disloyal to America and who were thought to work for Japan. But Dad did not work for Japan. He was merely active in our church after Mama died (Experiences, 1972, p. 19).

In "Japanese-American Citizen 1966", Mine describes how she illustrated the next following days.
On Tuesday when I returned to the Civil Control Station, I found our names posted on the board along with the family number. My family unit of two was scheduled to leave with the next to the last group on Friday, May 1, 1942 (p. 20).

We had three days and three nights to pack and get ready . . . (p. 21).

Our friends came to take us to the Civil Control Station. We took one last look at our happy home (p. 22).

The military police opened the bus door and we stepped into the bus as our family number was called. Many spectators stood around. At that I recalled some of the stories told on shipboard by European refugees bound for America.

We were silent on the trip except for a group of four University Of California Boys who were singing college songs. The bus crossed the Bay Bridge. Everyone stared at the beautiful view as if for the last time. The singing stopped (p. 26).

At about 12:30 we arrived at Tanforan Assembly Center. The gates were opened by military guards and the bus drove into the Tanforan Race Tracks grounds (p. 27).

She remembers how Citizen 13662 came about.

For me, Citizen 13662 started as a record of the evacuation in drawings and sketches because I wanted to make some kind of report to my many friends who faithfully sent letters and packages to let us know we were not forgotten. Being an artist, I found it natural to use this form of expression (1946, p. 29).

She retained her sense of humor during camp. At Tora she used to nail a quarantine sign on her door. This kept away both men next door and the Caucasian police. Once a police officer asked, "What got?" Mine replied, "Hoof and mouth disease!" After that, she was left alone (Experiencing, 1972).

At the permanent center in Tora, Mine worked on the camp art magazine, THEK. It ran for three issues during 1942-3. Mine's work varied during the six months she spent
at the Tanforan Race Track's in San Bruno and one and a half years at the Tule Lake Relocation Center in Utah. Her pictures during this period return to bleak black and white drawings. The lightheartedness of her Europe trip is gone. Her figures seem silently waiting, lethargic and weighted down with despair. She returns to the usage of the same tight lines of MOTHER AND CAT (Experiment, 1972).

Later drawings and art work during this period show a bustle of activity of people doing things. It is these drawings that later led to Citizen 1946 for Mine accurately and humorously portrayed camp life and how people coped in her sketches. She made a note of whatever caught her keen sense of humor and also captured the attempts by Japanese-Americans to beautify things.

A group of landscape architects decided to build a lake to beautify the camp. On August 2, North Lake was formally opened. In the morning sunlight and at sunset it added great beauty to the bleak barracks (Citizen, 1946, pp. 20-29).

In another drawing we see an extremely bewildered resident who is thinking, "Where am I?" below are rows of identical barracks. Mine pokes fun at a variety of things in her drawings: security checks, the lack of privacy, identical winter clothing, and the thick walls. She also deals with the daily discomforts: dust, heat, lines for everything, and cramped quarters.

Citizen 1946 was published in 1946, giving Mine national attention.门窗 Kitioka, an artist before evacuation and an editor of THEK, remembers:
None of the University presses on the West Coast would handle the book at the time. It was the touchy subject matter and I guess they also thought that there would not be a large demand for the book (Experience, 1972, p. 29).

After leaving camp, Mine received an assignment from Fortune art editors who were impressed with her art work in TREK. She moved to New York and made it her permanent home.

In 1946, Citizen 13660 was published and Mine's traveling exhibit called AS NISEI SAW IT. For the next ten years she freelanced doing art work for magazines, books, plus working on murals, fresco tiles and mosaics, as well as painting (Citizen, 1946, Experience, 1972).

Said Mine, "...it was from illustrating anatomy for a medical book that I learned the most. It taught me to investigate all the facts, like a scientist. I simplified and simplified...until...only the clear facts remained" (Experience, 1972, p. )

It was during these years that Mine began to rediscover herself for the first time since evacuation:

My beginning training in art has been completely Western. I followed the French Impressionists because they went the furthest in oils. I don't use watercolor because I like solid things. If you use watercolor, you might end up being pretty. I think in big, simple, monumental terms...

...In the end, I returned to the Primitives; to the flat usage of color and form used by Egyptians, Mayans, and Orientals. By going the full route and by proving it myself, I went back. Western artists are too mixed up with perspective. I believe that basic elements return to the two-dimensional (Experience, 1972, p. 41).

Though Mine continues to have a strong attachment to Riverside, she says:

I find New York a place where one can get lost if one wishes because there is so much going on. New York is a good place for serious creative work. The best comes out when one has to struggle and fight. (Kashu Mainichi, June 21, 1972, p.4).

Said Mine, "Most people live on the positive—but it's the negative things that make you strong. Things against you make you strong. It's an endless struggle" (Experience, 1972, p.48).
Looking back on her Evacuation experience, she says:

We had been told that the Evacuation was for our own protection and safety. We were given lodging, food and clothing so we should not have any worries, but we had plenty of them. The impact of evacuation is not on the material and physical. It is the effect on the spirit. What hurts most was the idea of being segregated and put away in a camp completely divorced from the national defense effort. Such action only helps to bring about greater hatred and to create further misunderstanding.

The Evacuation experience was most tragic for the isseis. The first generation mothers and fathers have suffered and sacrificed much to find a better place for their children. They have fought persecution and intolerance and struggled ceaselessly. Now they've lost everything they've worked so hard for—their homes, their businesses. And they're too old to start all over again afterwards. For them, it's all blown to the winds (Experience, 1972, p. 36).

Soon after 1951, Mine gave up exhibiting her work as well as freelancing. She remained in exile until 1968 when she exhibited her "Happy Paintings" at the Image Gallery in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

I decided to go back into painting and dedicate myself to the highest ideals in art. You can't serve two masters at the same time. I should have made this decision earlier but I was scared because once you're cut off, nobody cares. Most people don't make this decision. But you can't serve two masters at the same time. You either pursue the art business—show business system as a promotion game, or you're on your own which often means that your works don't sell (Experience, 1972, p. 42).

Nobuo Kitagaki said, "Georgia O'Keefe went to the desert to seek her inner vision. Mine went to New York and found a desert in which she created her own garden" (Experience, 1972, p. 42).

In her paintings GIRL WITH RED FLOWERS and GIRL WITH CAT, she has once again discovered full usage of color and form for her paintings. The influence of French Impressionists show up in her free use of color and brilliant expression of it. Her last period is what Mine herself likes to call her "Happy Period." In these paintings she has returned to Japanese native folk traditions for sources of inspiration (Experience, 1972).
In BOY WITH FISH we see a chubby boy in red shorts carrying a large purple fish which represents life and fertility in Japan and China. On Boy’s Day, May 5th, colorful fish banners are hung outside to blow in the wind. In Japan, a fish banner is used to announce a city boy (Fikowski, 1972).

Her primitive two-dimensional style can be seen in HORSE, MAN, CAT and FOUR FISH. Bold, bright colors of the painting playfully enhance the dancing animals. Among favorite subjects are boys, girls, cats, horses, and flowers. Joy and laughter abound in her paintings using colors that dance and sing. Most notably they suggest a triumph of man’s spirit over the complications of daily life.

In the end, Mine has triumphed over things because she did them her way!

To me, life and art are one and the same. I decided to take the long individual self-search road to find my own identity and my own forms, following the true values in creative work. It means going into loneliness. With nature as my guide, I turned back again to the fundamental basics of painting, by finding and understanding the content of reality, by mastering drawing, color and craft and reducing the elements to the simplest and most beautiful... so that one could express life universal, timelessness and agelessness. It has taken me twenty-one years. Now that I can talk in painting, there is so much beauty and wit and humor to be spread.

I never thought about marriage because I knew this is a man’s world. When you marry, don’t lied yourself, you’re number two. Besides, I don’t want to cook three meals a day and still have to say, ‘You’re cute!’ if you truly want to dedicate yourself to the highest, there’s no other way. Somehow I do everything the hardest way—my way (Experience, 1972, p. 49).
Concludes Mine, "But after all these years of struggle, it's coming into the wholeness of life, the wholeness of yourself again. And you realize you had it all from the very beginning. Once you make it good in one thing, all else will follow" (Experience, 1972, p. 51).
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