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WASHI 和紙 {Japanese paper art}
connecting cultures, countries, and generations
NAOKO MATSUBARA + ALEXA HATANAKA
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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Washi 和紙 Japanese paper art explores the myriad ways artists Naoko Matsubara and Alexa Hatanaka employ washi to convey the cross-cultural influence of Western and Eastern techniques. As a material, washi echoes the natural environment of the land it’s made from while holding the impressions of the artists who work with it. As such, washi transcends and absorbs the memory of its surroundings. When used in printmaking — both Matsubara and Hatanaka’s primary practice — washi becomes imbued with ink; the saturated paper becomes fundamental to the resonance of the final print itself. Matsubara and Hatanaka’s stories illustrate how serendipitous moments in one’s life can lead to interactions with people and mediums that afford new perspectives. Understanding the moments and influences that have shaped their paths can break down the distance between artist and viewer, allowing for new modes of understanding their work. Through the relations between print and material, Matusbara and Hatanaka’s work unveils how Nikkei diasporic communities find alternative methods that best suit their expression. This essay explores how the artists connect to their heritage while navigating their own interpretations of culture and history.
During their formative years, Matsubara and Hatanaka both chose printmaking as their primary medium. The development of their respective practices has involved relationships, interactions, and experiences that together have molded their continuous explorations within the realm of print and paper. Like peering into a kaleidoscope full of shapes and forms that come into focus, exploring certain experiences throughout the artists’ lives can help us understand their explorations with washi.

Matsubara grew up in Kyoto, a city that is known as the capital of traditional Japanese culture and art. She grew up surrounded by ancient monasteries, shrines, and gardens, and was exposed to renowned artisans, artists, performers, authors, and philosophers. Her father was a chief priest at a Shinto shrine, which became her personal playground — a childhood relic that shows up in her later work. In 1950s post-war Japan, Matsubara studied design at the Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts where her professor Felice “Lizzi” Rix-Ueno — known as Richi-sensei — became an influential figure in her life.

Richi-sensei was born in Vienna and was the top artist of Wiener Werkstatte under Joseph Hoffman. While teaching in Kyoto, Richi-sensei discovered the language barrier between herself and her students. Fortunately, her husband, Isaburo Ueno, was fluent in both German and Japanese. With his help in translating, the divide was bridged, and both he and Richi-sensei came to be influential figures in Matsubara’s life.

While experimental pedagogical approaches to art education were emerging in the West, Richi-sensei had introduced her students to non-conventional approaches to traditional art practices. As a student, Matsubara was formally introduced to woodblock printmaking, without using the traditional techniques of ukiyo-e, the most recognized printing method in Japan, which had been introduced as early as the 17th century. Matsubara recalls the way her professor centred the materials’ characteristics:

*Look at this wood block. It smells good, doesn’t it? Wood always has a lovely smell. Now carve the surface of the wood with your chisels and gouges. How do you feel? Here is a line carved with a knife: different from a line drawn with a pencil; totally different from a line made with the stroke of a brush. Look carefully.*

She recounts questioning the continued practice of old-fashioned methods, specifically ukiyo-e, with its “assembly-line” format that prioritized what would sell in the market rather than the artist’s creative expression. In the early 20th century, the sōsaku-hanga movement, which translates to “the creative print” movement, emerged as a response to commercial print practices and successfully elevated woodblock print into a fine art. The movement is known for the principles of *jiga*, *jikoku*, *jizuri*, or “self-designed,” “self-carved,” “self-printed.” Sōsaku-hanga contrasted with the collective practice of ukiyo-e, where each step was assigned to different individuals. Rather than depending on an ukiyo-e collective practice, which were often male-dominated, the individual nature of sōsaku-hanga may have enabled women working in woodblock to move into the realm of printmaking. More female printmakers emerged from this time onwards, refuting the patriarchal nature of fine art and traditional craft practices in Japan.
Matsubara remembers a sense of “hunger” to explore what lay beyond the status quo. Encouraged by Richi-sensei, she left Japan for North America on two separate occasions, first as a Fulbright Scholar at Carnegie Mellon University and later as an instructor at the Pratt Institute and Pratt Graphic Art Centre in New York. Eventually, Mastubara settled in Oakville, Ontario. As she began to establish herself in Canada, she was invited by the National Film Board of Canada to teach woodblock print techniques to artists in the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative in Kinngait, Nunavut. Although Matsubara spent only a few weeks in Kinngait, the similarity in respect for elders in Indigenous and in Japanese cultures and the beauty of the work made by Inuit artists left a deep impact on her.

Hatanaka is a yonsei (fourth generation) Japanese Canadian, who was born, raised, and is currently settled in Toronto, Ontario. She began her studies at Sheridan College in the Greater Toronto Area in illustration, working with large-scale illustrative projects. She then transferred to Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU), switching her major to printmaking. The OCADU program touched on a variety of methods and mediums of print, allowing students to explore their preferred processes. Through OCADU, she enrolled in an exchange program in Nanjing, China, where she was formally introduced to traditional Chinese paper and relief printing. In the midst of the exchange, the 2011 Tohoku tsunami took place, and a wave of fear spread worldwide over the nuclear contamination the Fukushima Daiichi power plant had released into the Pacific Ocean — a fragment of time that resurfaces in her later artwork.

From early on as an artist, collaboration has been imperative to Hatanaka’s work. Over the past eight years, she has collaborated with other Canadian artists, including local artists and knowledge keepers on projects primarily for and with youth in Kinngait, Nunavut. In both this collective practice and her solo practice, Hatanaka echoes her natural surroundings and navigates her own identity through interactions with paper. During a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 2019, she returned to papermaking, where she explored working with the material outside of its practical use for printmaking, moving towards a more three-dimensional and sculptural approach.
Cross-cultural art expression

The merging of cross-cultural art expression of the exhibiting artists is evident through the intertwining of their Japanese heritage with Western aesthetics and methods. The synthesis of Eastern and Western components in their practice expresses a duality of their identity: neither one nor the other, but both woven together.

At a first glance, Matsubara’s prints appear inherently Japanese, but her process reveals both Eastern and Western influences. She recalls how her childhood in wartime and post-war Japan — filled with memories of scarcity — developed into a sense of curiosity about the outside world, specifically the West. Japanese art greatly influenced Western Impressionism, especially ukiyo-e. However, Western approaches introduced by Richi-sensei presented Matsubara with the possibility of intuitive freedom in the realm of art. Matsubara’s oeuvre plays with an unconventional ink-base: oil, rather than water. The oil-based ink expresses a boldness that pairs with her vigorous engraved strokes. In addition, Matsubara approaches the carving process more freely, exploring how the knife interacts with the surface of the woodblock, and using unconventional carving instruments, such as electric power tools. After a trip to Tibet in 1986, she maneuvered her work towards colourful abstraction — we see a gradual progression of vibrancy and exploration of colour in her work from this time onwards, which pairs with her rhythmic strokes. In turn, the colour that begins to appear in her work conveys an emotional relation to the choice of hue.

Whereas Eastern print practices were focused on the idea of objective beauty, Matsubara takes a more expressionist approach, focusing on subjectivity. She finds muses within her surroundings, such as her series In Praise of Hands (1999), which was inspired by her heightened senses of observation while taking care of her infant son. Fascinated by the communication between a newborn and its mother, Matsubara began to explore how the movement of one’s hand gestures is a powerful exchange without the use of oral language. Further, Matsubara’s print Tagasode 17 colour woodcut (2014) can be seen as an ode to tagasode — paneled screens with painted images of draped garments over a lacquered rack — which were popular in Japan between the 17th and 20th centuries. Matsubara’s adaptation of tagasode, using quivering brisk strokes, vibrant colours, and abstract geometric forms and patterns, reveals new ways to depict and approach this motif.

Hatanaka draws on cross-cultural practices through the process of making and handling paper. As a student at OCADU, working with washi was viewed as an appreciation of the craft of papermaking and the material’s quality when used in printmaking. However, over time, working with washi has evolved into a practice that allows Hatanaka to honour, connect to, and navigate her identity. When making her own paper, she blends Western sheet-forming with Eastern fibres like gampi, a raw material commonly used for washi that is grown and harvested in the Philippines. Hatanaka began researching historic processes and the use of washi for kamiko, which translates to “paper garment.” Up until the end of the Edo-period in the late 19th century, washi was commonly used as a wearable garment. To enhance the durability of the paper for such purposes, additives were incorporated into the paper: momigami (“kneaded paper”) is treated with konnyaku (“root starch”), which allows the material to be strong and flexible; kakishibu (aged persimmon tannin) is used as a water-repellent agent; aizome (indigo dye) acts as an antibacterial
agent. Hatanaka employs these historical processes and patches them together into her paper garments. When it comes to her printing process, she creates loose preliminary sketches on the print block, either by drawing directly on it or by minimally tracing a projected photo, then freely carving on the block.

Both Matsubara and Hatanaka found ways to harmoniously combine their dual identities, which they translated through their creative expression. While acknowledging traditional practices, the merging of cultural aesthetics becomes an archetype for the Japanese diaspora.
ALEXA HATANAKA, *Untitled (Grandma hazmat suit)* (2022) 57” x 71”; *Armatures*, collaboration with and fabricated by YORGO LIAPIS
Transcendence of Japanese philosophy and etiquette

Both Matsubara and Hatanaka seamlessly weave cultural philosophy into their practice. This can be seen in the way they handle objects and materials. A recurring philosophy frequently used in Nikkei households — *mottainai* — is exhibited throughout the practice of both artists. The spirit of *mottainai* encompasses the Japanese ideology of having respect towards materials, objects, and belongings, a principle that some suggest stems from Buddhist and Shinto philosophy. *Mottainai* has been attributed to the scarcity of the past; it has become ingrained in Japanese values, encouraging the careful use of every last bit of material.

Matsubara lived through the Second World War and postwar Japan, when the spirit of *mottainai* was essential to every-day life. As a result, this philosophy naturally carried on with Matsubara, as she habitually saves the left-over pieces of washi from her canvas and transforms them into paper sculptures of organic shapes.

Similarly, Hatanaka makes use of left-over *washi* ends, old proofs, and other materials like rice bags to make them into new work. She applies the philosophy of *mottainai* in patchwork garments and suspended traditional ornamental pieces. The influence of cultural traits — in relation to the Japanese philosophy of *mottainai* — is deeply seated in the Nikkei diaspora.

Another aspect of Japanese mentality — *shoganai* — appears in one of Hatanaka’s pieces. *Shoganai* roughly translates to “it can’t be helped” or “there’s nothing we can do.” Hatanaka’s piece *SHOGANAI (Romaji + Hiragana)* (2021) 30” x 26” is a relic of other current events as well: the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying isolation. The delicate handmade paper, mixed with *kakishibu* for the alphabet and *aizome* for the *hiragana*, shows us a gentle yet daunting word of *shoganai*. Hatanaka contemplates the tension between Western and Eastern interpretations contained in the term. From a Western perspective, there is a sense of defeatism in the word, whereas, in the Eastern interpretation, it holds a heavy and complex expression of senselessness — of a situation being “out of one’s control,” and the mindset of moving on and letting go. At times, it is used as a word of encouragement. For instance, after failing an exam, there is nothing you can do about it but try harder next time. Or it can take on a more melancholic tone: there is nothing we can do about certain situations. Today, as we mark the 80th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian internment, many are evoking *shoganai* to remember the resilience of Nikkei across the Pacific West Coast. Reflecting on the mentality of acceptance has allowed many to move forward, to fight for justice and recognition.

i. NAOKO MATSUBARA, *10 paper sculptures* (2009 - 2010) 7” x 7” x 7” each
ii. NAOKO MATSUBARA, *Homage to Sculpture A - C* (2000) 33” x 25.5”
iii. ALEXA HATANAKA, *SHOGANAI (Romaji + Hiragana)* (2021) 30” x 26”
Memories can feel scattered; some we want to revisit, and some we want to suppress. Remembering can carry a complex mixture of joy, ease, turbulence, and grief. Matsubara’s prints are imbued with the lingering memories that captured her spirit, whereas Hatanaka’s body of work merges her cultural heritage with ideas of global vulnerability and climate disasters.

The imprint of memories can be photographic. Matsubara often interprets her visual memory of bodies, movement and form, whether it’s through the dancing figure in Maria Pages (2012) or in A Rider woodcut (2000), with motion depicted through the carved wind. Not only are they intertwined with the physical form, they leave a resonance of a sensitivity expressed through colour, carving methods, and inexplicit emotions. Although Matsubara’s woodblock print Kenkun Jinja (1977) is not included in this exhibition, in that piece, from the series Kyoto Woodcuts, she maps the shrine from her childhood playground.

Her memory of this playscape is carved highlighting certain landmarks: the tall tree near the entrance; the tori entrance with the name of the shrine carved in stone; the first signage written in kanji after the first staircase; the criss-crossing passage that leads to the shrine. The lingering spirit of her younger self can be seen through this map, and a peaceful ambiance is brought forth through the use of washi.

After Matsubara’s son was born, their bond was developed through the motions and gestures of hands, and she explores this theme in her woodcut series In Praise of Hands (1999). Her eyes focused on hands: the repetitive motion of knitting; the power of healing through the practice of reiki; the motion of cleaning one’s hands. In these moments, hands may be seen as a symbol of motherhood, which evolved into a continuous observance integral to our everyday things.

Matsubara has published a collection of books, ranging from portfolio collections, prints for children’s books, and book covers for authors, including Joy Kogawa. Her most recent publication, In Praise of Hands: Woodcuts By Naoko Matsubara - Poems By Penny Boxall, was published in 2020, during the pandemic, a time when anxiety about the virus led to extended social isolation and an absence of touch. The book brings together Matsubara’s images and Boxwell’s poetry, and was designed by Matsubara’s son, Yoshiki Waterhouse.

Like Matsubara, Hatanaka found herself searching through archives during the pandemic, digging through the remnants of her past work. Prints that she created in Nanjing emerged, which commemorated the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, and they, in turn, instigated the making of
Hatanaka’s first hazmat suit: Hazmat Suit [unborn/ reborn tsunami] (2020). In synchronous reflection, Hatanaka gestures to both the nuclear contamination that followed the earthquake and the contagion of the COVID-19 virus. Put together, the two events engage with the garment form to suggest the idea of protection from the surrounding toxicity and precarity from harmful invisible particles. Continuing with the theme of hazmat suits, Hatanaka created Untitled (Grandma hazmat suit) (2022), which incorporates a portrait of her grandmother, a gyotaku (fish print) of her grandmother’s favourite fish (mackerel), and a digital print of an archived photo of the aftermath of an earthquake that occurred before she left Japan in 1925. This photo left an impression on Hatanaka, and she explains how the unpredictable destruction of natural disasters acts as a metaphor for massive change. As well, in transforming a material like washi into the protective gear of a hazmat suit, Hatanaka evokes the process of making traditional Japanese paper garments. Since washi itself does not carry protective characteristics, agents such as aizome, kakishibu, momigami are added, all of which are used in her work. Alongside the adult-size hazmat suit, a child-size suit echoes how memories linger generationally, and the precarious future going forward.

Moments of solitude caused by the pandemic also spurred Hatanaka to reflect on social gathering. She searched for — and found — a VHS recording of herself at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto. The video allowed blurred memories of a childhood spent folk dancing at the Japanese summer festival to resurface in clear sight. In Untitled (Kakishibu Happi Coat) (2020), Hatanaka suspends a happi coat, a traditional lightweight coat worn during festivals, from the ceiling; it stands alone, worn by nobody. Ruminating over a time of social isolation, where communities were disconnected as a safety precaution, Hatanaka found herself questioning “what it means when we cannot gather from the perspective of cultural practice” and are forced to perform communal dances alone. Hatanaka explains that “dancing on our own” becomes “an interesting metaphor for the disconnect and individual journeys made by Nikkei to explore how we may understand our heritage.”

Hatanaka incorporates gyotaku throughout her work, creating an homage to her ancestors. Hatanaka’s great-grandparents worked in the fishing industry in B.C.: her great-grandmother at a cannery, and her great-grandfather as a fisherman. Mackerel prints recur in Hatanaka’s work, swimming on the surface of the washi.
Washi is a fundamental component in printmaking: it holds the impression of the carved plate, the intentions of the artists, and the stains of the ink. For centuries, craft objects and materials have been embedded in the daily life of ordinary Japanese people. Washi camouflages itself, existing subtly between the shoji screens, against the walls of one’s surroundings, absorbing the ink of calligraphers, painters, and printmakers. Moldable into garments, woven into furniture, washi is transient through our existence. In modern times, washi has been replaced with inexpensive materials, which led to a decline in demand of raw material farmers and papermakers. Washi becomes a niche material, and unaffordable for everyday use. From mid to late 20th century, papermills were forced to adapt with the development of technology in order to sustain the making of traditional crafts against the mass production of Western paper. Contemporary papermakers, using industrial machines, aimed to maintain its quality and to keep the texture similar to that of hand-made paper. Today, many papermills use both handmade and machine-made methods. Although the making of washi has evolved rapidly, the material itself carries important relations to Japanese people. For Matsubara and Hatanaka, the use of washi can be interpreted as a direct connection to their heritage and to memories of their past.

Matsubara has nostalgic ties to materials like washi. Her childhood memories seeped into the thin strips of paper that hung below bamboo trees during the Tanabata, or Star, festival — the many written wishes, fluttering in the summer wind. She recalls that making decorations for the festival sparked her strong admiration of paper, and describes the ambiance: “The moonlight, the star lights, the evening lights all made them look like a magical fantasy.”

As a child, she collected paper, whether it was washi, cellophane, or chiyogami, and kept it safely in a treasure box. Paper was her prized possession; it was a part of her life, existing subtly in her surroundings, as well as explicitly in the realm of play.

Like Matsubara, Hatanaka values and repurposes scrap paper. She names one of her kamiko pieces mottainai, too good to waste (2020). This work takes miscellaneous pieces of paper left from past projects and sews them into new works. Further, Hatanaka both works with machine-made, hand-made washi made as well as making her own paper by hand. This enhances how the paper portrays the ink and its usability for sewing.

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i. ALEXA HATANAKA, SHOGANAI (Hiragana) (2021) 30” x 26”
ii. NAOKO MATSUBARA, 10 paper sculptures (2009 - 2010) 7” x 7” x 7” each
For artists like Naoko Matsubara and Alexa Hatanaka, *washi* retains a stained surface, carrying the impressions of its surroundings. For Matsubara, *washi* holds a reminiscence of her childhood treasure. For Hatanaka, it allows her to explore historic processes connected to her heritage. Both artists handle the material with care, without waste. They reveal the complexity of identity through Western and Eastern cross-cultural elements in their work. As it holds the memory of the stitches on Hatanaka’s garments, and the tears that drape into Matsubara’s print, *washi* captures the moment of time that once brought forth the unexplainable gestures that allowed the artists’ bodies to move in the act of making.
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