



# PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

ISSN: 2471-6839

---

**Cite this article:** Michelle Yee, review of *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1959>.

## ***Chiura Obata: An American Modern***

**Curated by:** ShiPu Wang

**Exhibition Schedule:** Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara: January 13–April 29, 2018; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City: May 25–September 2, 2018; Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, Okayama, Japan: January 18–March 10, 2019; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento: June 23–September 29, 2019; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC: November 2019–April 2020

**Exhibition Catalogue:** ShiPu Wang, ed. *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, exh. cat. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 192 pp; 135 color illus.; Hardcover \$50.00 (ISBN: 9780520296541)

**Reviewed by:** Michelle Yee, PhD candidate, History of Art and Visual Culture, University of California, Santa Cruz

*Chiura Obata: An American Modern* is a quietly revolutionary exhibition. Despite having quite a bit of success during his lifetime and being one of the few canonical Asian American artists (along with recognizable artists such as Isamu Noguchi and Maya Lin) in the evolving narratives of American art history, Chiura Obata's massive body of work is rarely exhibited and, until now, has never had a major retrospective. Likewise, the accompanying exhibition catalogue is the first published survey of Obata's work. The exhibition at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts (UMFA) is the largest iteration of the traveling show. The exhibition is comprised of approximately 150 of Obata's works across five galleries and offers a rare and comprehensive overview of the long and varied career of this American artist. First and foremost, that Obata is viewed as deserving of a major retrospective is what makes the show revolutionary. Furthermore, the installation of the exhibition at venues across the United States and in Japan addresses Obata's role in what curator ShiPu Wang calls "cosmopolitan modernism."<sup>1</sup> Amid growing anti-immigrant rhetoric here in the United States, this exhibition functions as active resistance against the nativist insistence on birthright, belonging, and citizenship.

Additionally, disciplinary limitations that have plagued the field of Asian American art have historically led Obata's work to be primarily written about and considered in isolation, and he, as a figure, is often positioned only alongside other Asian American artists. In the exhibition and accompanying catalogue, *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, Wang sets out to frame Obata's work as that of an American modern. In so doing, Wang places Obata within an artistic milieu that includes Obata's more well-known contemporaries, such as Edward Hopper, Stuart Davis, and Marsden Hartley, whose work grappled with concerns of modern life and modern artmaking. American modern artists frequently utilized similar

artistic strategies as their European counterparts to address American concerns of modern life in the first half of the twentieth century, such as war, migration, urbanism, poverty, loneliness, and industrialization. Likewise, Obata's negotiation of contemporary issues, such as war and militarism, are negotiated through an increasing abstraction of nature—his main preoccupation. The thematic focus of this exhibition is on Obata's paintings of nature, in various forms, as a metaphor for humanity.

The exhibition at the UMFA begins with a portrait of Chiura Obata as a young artist, painted by his older brother, Rokuichi Obata. This portrait depicts the artist as an art student who trained in Tokyo at a top art school studying not only traditional Japanese techniques, but also Western art and art history. In 1903, Obata immigrated to the United States. The seventeen-year-old artist settled in San Francisco with the intention of studying American art before continuing on to Paris. Obata came to the United States with the purpose of seeing what he called "Great Nature," and he ultimately never left the United States. He eventually opened an art store in San Francisco and obtained a professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. The exhibition opens with several small watercolors that Obata painted depicting the San Francisco earthquake of 1908. From there, Obata's obsession with nature is reflected throughout the entire exhibition. For the artist, nature and its capability for both beauty and destruction is matched only by humanity and its potential for compassion and terror. These paradoxical themes are made manifest in an impressive body of work that is carefully ordered and laid out through a deceptively calm and meditative exhibition.

The large central gallery space was dedicated to Obata's most well-known landscapes of some of Yosemite's most notable vistas. Yosemite, a national park, is one of the most iconic spaces of the American West. As captured in the work of numerous American artists, such as Albert Bierstadt, Carleton Watkins, and Ansel Adams, Yosemite boasts some of America's most often represented and recognizable views. Obata's Yosemite landscapes are similarly celebrated, as noted by Wang in the catalogue, having been featured in Ken Burns's 2009 documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*.<sup>2</sup> Obata's paintings of this quintessentially American landscape represent a claim to the idea and ideal of America, a concept that ought to be defined as much by westward expansion and its spaces as it was by the immigrants that made such expansion possible.



Fig. 1. Installation view of Chiura Obata's Yosemite paintings, *Chiura Obata: An American Modern* at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City, UT. Photograph courtesy of Utah Museum of Fine Arts

Behind the large central gallery, four smaller galleries offered a simultaneously thematic and chronological division of Obata's work. In the first of these smaller galleries, Obata's paintings of Ikebana flower arrangements by his wife, Haruko Kohashi, present not only a careful and sensitive eye to the aesthetic details of floral arrangements but also reference his marriage of sixty-three years.<sup>3</sup> The paintings act as a multilayered reflection of artistic ability: Obata's own skillful paintings interpret Kohashi's delicate talent at flower arrangements. Considered in the context of the exhibition, however, the Ikebana arrangements are also examples of organized nature, of nature brought indoors into domestic spaces and made perfect. The intimacy of these paintings alongside Obata's careful, detailed drawings of fish and other animals stand in stark contrast to the vast landscapes of his Yosemite paintings.



Fig. 2. Installation view with *Untitled (Woman in Fur Walking at Night)* (c. 1930s) at center in *Chiura Obata: An American Modern* at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City, UT. Photograph courtesy of Utah Museum of Fine Arts

In the adjacent galleries, Obata's Berkeley-era paintings depict typical college life on an American campus. Obata was hired as an instructor in 1932 in the art department, a rarity for a Japanese American. The galleries present notable and recognizable scenes on the UC Berkeley campus alongside more of Obata's landscapes. Located along the back wall of that particular gallery is an untitled sumi-e ink painting of a young woman walking alone at night along a well-lit sidewalk in what appears to be a fur coat. Her coat seems incongruous with mild Northern California weather, which is more suited for the woman's bare legs. While the bright lights, street sign, and waste bin seem to indicate a well-populated location, the woman is alone. Her anonymity and the starkness of the street beside her strongly recall the work of Edward Hopper, another American modern artist whose work negotiated the loneliness that plagued modern urban life. The painting is a jarring reminder of the isolation of Obata from the narrative of American art history—a visual signifier of his exclusion. Obata's biography is instead often read as the quintessential immigrant success story—the Japanese immigrant artist who arrived in San Francisco in the era after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, when anti-Asian sentiment was rampant, and managed to make it as a University of California, Berkeley, art professor. Such a narrative, however, is not well-supported by Obata's own work, which rarely seems to address personal narrative or identity.

A little further down the back wall from the genre portrait of the young Berkeley woman is a 1941 painting, *Landslide*, which functions as a stark reminder of the impending war looming over Japanese Americans in the United States. The painting of *Landslide* corresponds with a transitory moment in Obata's life, in his subject matter, and also in the design of the retrospective. While the initial gallery and the smaller galleries up to this point depict representational nature in pleasing shades of blues, greens, oranges, and reds, *Landslide* is far more abstracted and acts as a breaking point in which the sublimity of nature and its awe-inspiring qualities are brought forward just as the political landscape of the World War II era ramped up toward a full and terrifying climax. Less than a year after Obata painted *Landslide*, Japan would drop bombs on Pearl Harbor, and President Franklin Roosevelt would unleash Executive Order 9066 that ultimately ripped Obata from his professorship at UC Berkeley and placed him, along with approximately 120,000 other Japanese Americans, into forced incarceration in the Japanese American Internment Camps. In the painting, a small family of figures stands faceless and helpless, surrounded by swirling mud painted in gloomy ochres and browns. The haunting painting suggests external, unstoppable, and overwhelming forces in play. As a landscape, it also suggests the sublimity, awesomeness, and unpredictability of nature, characteristics reminiscent of the earthquake that Obata had represented soon after his arrival to the United States. Tellingly, the curator positioned *Landslide* in between Obata's Berkeley paintings and the subsequent internment paintings.

The gloomy colors and muted tones of *Landslide* continue through Obata's internment-era paintings. Furthermore, his black-and-white sketches that depict the quotidian camp lives of the internees are filled with reference to the conditions of cold, wind, rain, and dirt that made the experience unbearably inhumane. The punishing natural elements serve as a reminder of the injustice inflicted by man's inhumanity. In Utah, the location of the Topaz War Relocation Site, this gallery held particular poignancy, especially in light of the long-awaited Topaz Museum that recently opened in 2017 in remembrance of and to honor the Japanese American internment experience.

From the gallery of internment works, the visitor exits into the far end of the large central gallery, where Wang displayed Obata's three paintings of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the United States dropped the atomic bombs. Hung so that the visitor could view it in tandem with *Landslide* on the far back wall of the exhibition space, *Devastation* is reminiscent of *Landslide*. Instead of an intimidating swirl of mud and earth surrounding a small figural group, *Devastation* shows two forlorn figures, one with its head in its hands, sitting in a landscape that has already been utterly devastated by America's bombs and abstracted in the same ochres and browns by Obata's brush. Here again, the terrifying awesomeness of nature is matched only by humanity and its surreal capability of inflicting devastation. ShiPu Wang's exhibition design, however, again conjures Obata's appreciation for nature, and in turn, his belief in the ability of humanity to nurture. Next to *Devastation* are two other postwar works that address the devastation of Japan, *Prayer* and *Harmony*. Both were painted in 1946 after Obata read that "amid the wreckage of Hiroshima, grass was growing, and his beliefs were vindicated. Nature was already absorbing the scar tissue of war."<sup>4</sup> It is a reminder that when Obata and his family, like thousands of other Japanese Americans, were forced to sell or lose their businesses and their properties, it was a fellow Berkeley art professor who kept many of Obata's paintings and belongings safe during the duration of the war. Such instances of kindness and empathy may have seemed rare and insignificant in light of the atrocities that the American government inflicted both on their

own citizens in the United States and on the Japanese islands with the dropping of the bombs. For Obata, however, they tangibly existed.

The visual paradox between nature and culture, destruction and nurture, and compassion and cruelty are the primary themes that appear throughout the entire exhibition. While racial tension certainly exists as an undercurrent throughout Obata's life and the lives of Asian Americans at this time, the exhibition and its title make evident and insistently name Obata as an American and a modern artist in the tradition of Western art; his status as both ought to be understood and accepted as a given. In that light, the opportunity to consider Obata as a major artist within the canon of American art, and more widely within the dominant canon of Western art and art history, and therefore deserving of a traditional retrospective, is what makes this exhibition revolutionary. The exhibition simply offers a unique body of work by one of the great American modern artists.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> ShiPu Wang, "Introduction," in ShiPu Wang, ed. *Chiura Obata: An American Modern*, exh. cat. Oakland: University of California Press, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Wang, *Chiura Obata*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Wang, *Chiura Obata*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Obata exhibition text, republished in Wang, *Chiura Obata*, 114.