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The Alien under the "Gaze": Japanese-American Identity Issues in American Infamy #2 from the Perspective of Visual Archaeology

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Abstract: Based on the theory of visual archaeology, this paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the historical strata and power mechanisms in Roger Shimomura's American Infamy #2 through the central visual motif of the "soldier's gaze". It investigates the construction of identity, historical trauma and collective memory among Japanese Americans. Based on Shimomura's personal experience of being detained in a World War II internment camp and his later service as a U.S. military serviceman, this study explores the soldier figure and the act of gazing in his painting. The soldier is the institution of supervision and is also in a state of self-doubt; his life shows racial oppression, disciplinary power, and the historical trauma of the workplace in pictures. Compare the critical view of first-hand witnesses with the constructed view created by the mainstream culture assimilation to study the struggles of Japanese-American communities in the face of historical memory, main cultural assimilation and identity erasure. Based on the artist's own life experiences, the work is an expression of ethnic trauma in pictures. Research has been conducted on the social function of art and has extended the application of visual culture and minority-group identity studies.

1. Introduction

Born in Seattle in 1939, Roger Shimomura was a second-generation Japanese-American (Fig.1). Shortly after his birth, Executive Order 9066 authorized his family's internment in wartime detention camps following Japan's military attack on Pearl Harbor. Paradoxically, this Japanese-American who had temporarily lost his liberty on U.S. soil was later enlisted in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) for two-year military service in 1961. The two formations mentioned above significantly affected Shimomura's art. He often contrasts the stereotypes of Asian-Americans with idealized images of American society in his works to show the different collective memories of World War II among Japanese-Americans and the marginalized position of this ethnic group in American society (Fig.2, Fig.3).



Fig.1 (Roger Shimomura)



Fig.2 Roger Shimomura, (Shimomura Crossing the Delaware)

2010, acrylic on canvas, 72 ×144 inches. Seattle National Museum of Washington State, permanent collection



Fig.3 Roger Shimomura, (Dinner Conversation with Nancy)

1983, acrylic on canvas, 60 ×72 inches. Donated to the Spencer Museum of Art

In American Infamy #2 (Fig.4), however, Shimomura does not use the familiar style of ukiyo-e woodblock prints and does not employ the traditional narrative device of pairing stereotypical Japanese figures with iconic American historical figures. He reconstructs the historical reality of the Japanese-American War Internment. Centred on the "watchtower soldier", it is both a personal remembrance and a self-reflection, and also explores the politics of identity and the effects of memory-driven historical trauma.

The motif of the "soldier's gaze" is also used in Jonathan Crary's visual archaeology system. Crary is the system of historical power relations in images. Rather than just exploring forms of representation, he considers vision a way to acquire knowledge and exert disciplinary power over the body [1]. Contemporary visual culture has been constrained by disciplines and modes of social participation in terms of how we see. Therefore, this paper will employ a visual archaeology approach to explore the historical layers and power dynamics in the visual symbols and gaze of the subjects. Shimomura explores how historical memory shapes identity and is lost in the process of mainstream assimilation.



Fig.4 Roger Shimomura, *American Infamy #2*

2006, acrylic on canvas, 72 ×120 inches. Boise Art Museum, permanent collection

2. Interpretation of the “Soldier’s Gaze” Motif from Visual-Archaeological Perspective

(1) Deconstruction of the “Soldier’s Gaze” Motif

American Infamy #2 is a folded-screen type that can give a sense of time and place for the story. Grey translucent clouds are scattered across the whole of the picture to divide it into a "watchtower area" and an "internment camp area", and many spaces have been created in this flat picture. A helmeted soldier in the foreground is positioned at the top of the visual field and can attract the attention of viewers. Neat barracks, barbed-wire fences and distant watchtowers are arranged in this field of view to create a prison-like environment. A watchtower is used to show that the camp residents are not important. The soldier's posture and equipment are symbols of the power to observe, which the internees do not have.

The soldier is in the shadows and mist, unseen by the camp residents, but they are aware of his presence and thus feel the coercive, unacknowledged power of objectification. The Surveying

Institution is not in favour of the internees and does not involve the soldiers. First, the look is that of observation and confinement that Shimomura experienced in his childhood under the American system; at the same time, it reflects the ongoing lack of trust between American institutions and racial minorities. At the same time, this shadowy soldier is also in conflict with his own military life, having been an internee who later joined the American military. The two identities give rise to a problem of desire. This is the second layer of the motif: symbolic self-reflection on the problems of identity.

(2) Historicity embedded within the “Soldier’s Gaze”

The "soldier's gaze" is a visual record of the historical trauma suffered by Japanese Americans. As an essential visual and historical support for the camp-site picture, it presents the idea of power-infused vision and exposes the racial segregation policies during the war.

Executive Order 9066 also targeted German Americans and Italian Americans, not only Japanese Americans. However, Japanese Americans also faced much wider public suspicion and distrust. According to The Huffington Post, at the time, people generally believed that "Germans and Italians could be trusted in certain circumstances, but a Japanese person is still Japanese" [2]. Seattle, Shimomura's hometown in the West Coast region near Japan and the battlefields of the Pacific War, had increased xenophobia and anti-Japanese sentiment among the local populace.

After the war, the US government issued a formal apology and reparations. President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to address the problems caused by mass incarceration of Japanese Americans [3]. Trauma has affected the survivors and continues to impact U.S. immigration policy in recent years. Satsuki Ina wrote that in 1942, "we disappeared... America turned its back on us" [4].

Along with other camp-related visual materials, the "soldier's gaze" can be used to show the military coercion and daily life in the internment camp vividly. It is a visual repository for the history of the region.

3. Disparities in the Right to Vision Symbolized by the “Soldier’s Gaze” under Visual Archaeology

American Infamy #2 is relatively different from the other works by Shimomura. Look closely at the characters who are not soldiers. Only by examining both the gaze subjects and the objects of gaze can we explore power imbalances in vision.

(1) Survivors’ Critical Vision

The Watchtower Soldier is a form of self-projection by Shimomura. In the lower right corner of the picture, two extra soldiers are standing in the background (Fig.5). In addition to the high-angle shot of the watchtower, these ground-level shots of the military figures also show Shimomura's dual roles as an observer and a participant in the interaction with the interned ethnic compatriots. This combined view is based on Shimomura's own life: he was a Japanese-American subject to US state persecution, a well-educated man who joined the US military, and an artist who suffered from widespread anti-Asian prejudice. All of them have motivated continuous self-reflection on ethnic identity.



Fig.5 Detail from *American Infamy #2*

Shimomura, as a third-generation Japanese-American, frequently explores the problems of identity in his art. On the other hand, members of his parents' generation had different attitudes towards war. Such differences are evident in American Infamy #2. Shimomura said in an interview that, first of all, imprisonment was not mentioned at home. It was completely out of the question to be mentioned [5]. Silence from this family was also typical. Doan Nguyen, a senior tour manager at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, once told me that his parents used to tell him to "forget about his past". Second-generation Japanese Americans were thus silent about the issue and chose not to mention it. This form of revisionist collective amnesia served to avoid conflict and responsibility. By suppressing trauma, second-generation Japanese Americans sought to show that they were not rebellious and to gain the approval of American society. Such a pragmatic escape is in contrast to the war.

Shimomura Reconstructs Camp Scenes to Criticise the Deliberate Silence of Second-Generation Japanese Americans. He wants to remember this history and does not want the collective amnesia to continue. His criticism is also due to his different life circumstances, higher education and military service. Shimomura uses drama to show that the voices of the oppressed can also be anti-hegemonic. He proposes transforming the politics of ethnic group identity from passive victimhood into active self-narration and avoiding selective historical revisionism.

(2) The Constructed Vision of the Assimilated Subject

As objects of attention, people with distinctive yellow facial features can be identified as being of Asian descent. These characters are of various ages and not grouped together; thus, they have created a sense of ordinary life in the internment camp. Grey clouds are gathering over the area of the internees and the watchtower, providing some shelter for the guards observing from afar. Notably, none of the confined detainees have shown an impulse to look back. They are completely contained within their own ethnic communities. This imagery metaphorically reflects the social attitudes held by second-generation Japanese-Americans toward social interaction and inter-ethnic marriage for themselves and their children of the third generation. [7]Costumes worn by camp inhabitants faithfully reflect mainstream American fashion trends from the 1940s to 1950s (Fig.6), indirectly illustrating cultural integration among second-generation Japanese-Americans and third-generation children growing up within that historical context.



Fig.6 Kitty Foyle dresses, tailored suits and military-style trench coats popular in 1940s-1950s America

Shimomura suggests that, to some extent, most of the racially isolated Japanese Americans at that time had received formal education and considered themselves American citizens. A father and son are playing baseball in the picture, which is America's national sport (Fig.7).



Fig.7 Father and son shortly after a baseball game

However, these well-educated people who wholeheartedly identified as Americans were imprisoned due to the baseless wartime suspicion. However, this ethnic group did not have the ability or the resources for open resistance. Given the above circumstances, Shimomura does not use coded visual metaphors of ethnic rebellion in his work. Artistically, it shows that he is close to his parents' generation and respects communal history. Therefore, he comes to the conclusion that the subjects of the study are incapable of independent interpretation. Shimomura reproduces the scenes and tells the stories of history, but he and his people are always outsiders and strangers to the institution. The Work of Art is a Visual Metaphor for Foucault's Panopticon. The Panopticon is a symbol that has been used to represent changes in disciplinary institutions and the spread of power [8]. This offers new directions for the Visual Archaeology of American Infamy #2. The vision of the constructed subjects is constrained by the dominant discourse, which either ignores or distorts historical trauma as a result of disciplinary mainstream visual systems. These American cultural symbols seem to be a voluntary acceptance of US norms by Japanese-Americans, but in fact, they are the result of dominant discursive discipline. When marginalised groups exhaust all means to prove their "Americanness", they have also lost the ability to self-define. The logic of visibility

reduces the oppressed to complicit characters in the system of oppression, and individuals place the power dynamics onto their own bodies and internalize the rules to which they are subjected [8]. Therefore, the second-generation Japanese-American attitude towards historical trauma has been shaped by the dominant discourse in the United States rather than arising from an inherent cultural trait of "forbearance", a characteristic that scholars have often mistakenly attributed to Japanese-Americans and other Asians.

4. Conclusion

Roger Shimomura has changed the subject of the pictures in American Infamy #2 away from the daily life of the ethnic group in the internment camp and now focuses on a watchtower soldier. The different views in this figure transform Jonathan Crary's theory of visual archaeology into actual artistic creation, and visual symbols are employed as historical layers to reveal the fundamental conflicts in the formation of Japanese-American identity. Due to deep-seated historical trauma and continuous pressure from mainstream discipline, Japanese Americans face two primary obstacles in their pursuit of self-determination: active individual resistance to collective forgetting, and the passive erasure of group memory. A picture of a soldier and his eyes is Shimomura's self-examination. It is no longer about a simple division of people and does not promote the celebration of diversity in the United States. Finally, American Infamy #2 shows that art is not only the product of history. It is a way to reconstruct history and explore the theme of identity. When the soldier looks at the painted clouds, it is not only the identity crisis of Japanese-Americans but also a universal problem for all ethnic minorities seeking self-respect in a dominant society—the fundamental issue of identity. This is the most profound contribution of the work to contemporary visual-cultural studies and discussions on identity politics.

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