

Okada: Lessons in Art History

Judith van Praag

Five years after the death of Frank Okada, the Museum of Northwest Art in La Conner honors the Pacific Northwest Nissei painter with a retrospective show.

Okada was born in 1931 in the International District. At Roosevelt High he made friends with musicians such as Quincey Jones and Buddy Catlat, on Saturdays he took art classes. At that time the I.D. had a lively Jazz scene and age restrictions didn't apply the way they do nowadays, so Okada took in a lot of music. Still, in an interview with Barbara Johns in 1990, he denies that the music had an effect on his artwork. And yet when you look at the paintings on display at MoNA, that's hard to believe. If it isn't the composition, or the vibrant colors, it's the multi layered, multitude of brush strokes that make his work sing. Frank Okada made music visible.

Okada compared his daily discipline, rising early to put in hours of brushstroke after brushstroke to his parents' Buddhist rituals each morning. He called his work dedicatory to the memory of what was.

There's nothing like a painter's retrospective, to show how creative work evolves over time. The paintings on display are a lesson in art history.

Co-curators Susan Parke and Kazuko Nakane included work from MoNA's own collection by Okada's teachers at Cornish, James Peck, Mark Tobey, and contemporaries Paul Havas, Paul Horiuchi, William Ivey and Merle Matison as well as Leon Berbyshire (of the School of Art with the same name).

Nakane writes in the catalogue "Frank Okada: the Shape of Elegance": "Both of Okada's early teachers may now be forgotten

in regional history, but Okada understood and appreciated their approaches in broader art historian context and remembered them as individuals who imparted a special value to his art and life."

The voyage through Okada's career starts with "Summer Light" ('53), its color palette a remainder of Okada's studies with Leon Berbyshire, and the painting the only one in the show that's representational. Images etched into barely dry paint give the painting a multi-layered quality that allows for more luminance than mere paint would have accomplished.

A sumi painting sent home from Korea (Okada served as a medic from 1952-1953), shows his interest in abstract art.

Okada received his first art prize from the Puyallup Fair, and was a recipient of a Whitney Scholarship in 1957, a Fulbright Scholarship (which took him to Kyoto) in 1959 and a Guggenheim Scholarship in 1967.

While attending the Canbrook Academy of Art, in Bloomsfield Hills, Michigan, Okada visited New York City where he was introduced to abstract expressionism; he stopped making representational art. Work from that period shows broad-brush strokes and black lines separating color fields. Around the same time he started to bring vibrant colors into his palette, which he juxtaposed on a plain. From a distance Okada's work appears to be just that, fields of color and geometric shapes. Come up close and you see layers on top of layers of cross hatched brush strokes, colors shining through, colors reacting on colors; a study in light.

In 1969 Okada started teaching at the University of Oregon at Eugene. Adhering to his morning studio discipline, working in his time consuming method, he could produce five large paintings in two years. Among his smaller works are series inspired by the shape of axes fans, kimonos and toast.

Over the years Okada showed his work all over the US, in Europe and in Japan. After he retired as professor emeritus in 1999, he continued living and working in Eugene until his death in 2000.

Undoubtedly Frank Okada the teacher lives on in the memories of his students; as a Japanese American Northwest painter, he lives on in his whole oeuvre.

Saturday, Nov.19 at 7:30 p.m., poet Lawson Fusao Inada will present "Poetry and Painting: A Tribute to Frank Okada". Accompanied by jazz musicians Yusuf Kilgore, guitar and Philip Nakano, saxophone, Inada will read new poems written in response to Okada's paintings at MoNA in La Conner.

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