

# Mindfulness in the city: Transforming shame



## Transforming feelings of shame into pride through art

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

OTTAWA — The Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) is hosting a retrospective exhibition of Ottawa-based artist Norman Takeuchi's life and art entitled *The Shapes in Between* until Aug. 27, 2023. The collection of Takeuchi's drawings, paintings, and prints spans his 60-year art career from 1961 to 2022, developed in consultation with the Japanese Canadian community. During a panel discussion at the OAG on Apr. 16 with curators Catherine Sinclair, Sachiko Okuda, and Bryce Kanbara, Takeuchi spoke about his search for identity. As a Japanese Canadian,

Takeuchi carried shame from the internment and racism he experienced for a long time. These feelings were so deep and long-lasting that they impacted his art. He preferred to be recognized as a Canadian artist first. In 1995, he saw the exhibition, *Homage to Nature: Landscape of Kimonos of Itchiku Kubota* at the Museum of Civilization (now Canadian Museum of History) in Gatineau, QC. Takeuchi admired the exquisite beauty of the kimonos and was deeply moved. It was a turning point, making him feel more positive about his heritage. In 1998, Takeuchi created a series called *A Measured Act*, referring to the War Measures Act, which enabled the swift approval of policies that forced the internment, dispossession, and deportation of Japanese Canadians between 1942 and 1949.

*"Takeuchi describes himself as a 'late bloomer' in embracing his Japanese Canadian heritage, which was also true for me."*

Creating a series of five large paper kimonos painted and collaged with iconic images of the wartime treatment of Japanese Canadians, it was the first time he included this subject in his work. Seeing the iconic images of the Japanese Canadian experience

encompassed in the beauty of Takeuchi's art was powerful and moving. It hit home the reality of what happened to my family, and I was moved to tears by what they had to go through this and what they had lost. **Late bloomer** Takeuchi describes himself as a "late bloomer" in embracing his Japanese Canadian heritage, which was also true for me. As a chef, I never wanted to be labelled as a Japanese chef. I just wanted to be recognized as a *good* chef. I never identified with the title of chef. I didn't follow the traditional path of working my way up the ranks in the kitchen. I acquired my culinary skills through chef school in NYC and internships at various restaurants in Canada, the U.S., and Japan. However, the machismo, sexism, and anti-veg attitude prevalent in the restaurant industry led me to create something different that reflected my values. Zen-Kitchen restaurant in Ottawa, Canada's first fine-dining vegan restaurant, was born! **Carrying shame** My ex-partner and I found an established French restaurant in Chinatown that met most of our requirements, so we rented it. I was apprehensive about opening



Norman Takeuchi, *Hastings Park*, 2006, acrylic, conté, oil pastel, photo transfer on shaped paper support, 148 x 132 cm. Collection of the Canadian War Museum.

a restaurant in Chinatown, fearing that people would expect me to serve "Asian" cuisine due to my Japanese ancestry. I recall a media person remarking on my move to Chinatown, "Now you can be with your people." Which people was he referring to? I was shocked and angry at this statement and wanted to retort. However, I didn't want to make waves, so I shifted the conversation to something else. I felt uneasy and ashamed,

even though I had done nothing wrong. This sense of shame was passed down through my family, who felt unwanted and "bad" during and after the internment, causing them to become law-abiding, quiet, and subservient. I've internalized this sense of shame and victimhood, which has affected my life. Despite my anxiety about opening a restaurant in China-

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from the start. "There are major cultural themes related to Norman, who comes from a Japanese Canadian background," said Sinclair, intent on including curators "who could speak better to this than me." Japanese Canadian community leaders Sachiko Okuda and artist and art activist Bryce Kanbara were invited to be co-curators to ensure the cultural history and experiences of Takeuchi and the Japanese Canadian community would be sensitively and thoughtfully expressed. To achieve this balanced approach, Okuda and Kanbara launched in-person consultations to help inform, most specifically, the writing of the labels (descriptors) of the art pieces in the "Japanese Cultural Heritage" and "Internment Legacy" sections. Two separate consultation sessions, each with six participants, took place at the OAG in October 2022, with representation from Nisei (including two former internees), Sansei, and Yonsei, as well as Japanese-born Nikkei. Participants in the sessions were asked to reflect on different art pieces, and their observations and feedback both surprised and challenged some of the assumptions of the curatorial team. "Even within our small [Japanese Canadian] community, there was a real range of reactions to that piece," said Okuda

in an interview, referring to *View of Lemon Creek from Mt. Fuji* (2018). "And, more significantly, there was a real range of knowledge of the elements that made up that piece." Based on this feedback, Team Takeuchi realized that if Nikkei didn't know or recognize what had been considered iconic imagery, it was clear that the general population would be unlikely to recognize it either. The curatorial team undertook the writing of the labels with a commitment to go beyond providing basic details and openly attempted to educate and contextualize themes in Takeuchi's

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work within the Japanese Canadian historical context to encourage understanding. "We want people to come out to the exhibition... read the labels... and come away feeling smarter, better about themselves and their relationship with art," Okuda said. To further engage and encourage art lovers and members of the Ottawa area to visit the gallery, the OAG hosted a live panel discussion with co-curators of *Shapes in Between* at the OAG, where attendees had a unique opportunity to connect with the artist himself. Takeuchi shared that seeing all of his work together for the very first time allowed him to recog-

nize his search for some kind of identity has always appeared in his work. He explained that for most of his early life, right through to adulthood, he deliberately avoided any reference to being Japanese, a direct result of deeply negative feelings and shame towards his heritage caused by the trauma of the forced dispersal. "I remember as a teenager I wanted to be anything but Japanese... I wanted to be James Dean," said Takeuchi with a laugh. In later adulthood, Takeuchi reached a point where he knew he needed to address these negative feelings and explore and embrace themes of Japanese heritage and identity. As a result, his artwork shifted to reflect a style that he feels is uniquely his own.

"I started to incorporate Japanese images in my work... to say 'this is who I really am'," said Takeuchi. "I am now producing art that is mine, that these are honest statements, and it gave me a lot of confidence in what I was doing." As a fellow artist, Bryce Kanbara praised the technique, the beauty, and the "completeness" of Takeuchi's work, crediting Takeuchi for "incorporating traditional Japanese and Japanese Canadian imagery, and bringing them together" in a way that makes us think about the past. Clarissa Evans, a Yonsei who grew up in Toronto but now calls



Norman Takeuchi, *View of Mount Fuji from Lemon Creek*, 2012-2018, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Ottawa home, attended the panel discussion and also visited the *Shapes in Between* exhibit and found a lot of commonalities between her own experience grappling with identity and that of Takeuchi. "Seeing a lifetime of Norman's work presented through this retrospective resonated with me through his artistic expression of his internal conflict between the Japanese and Canadian parts of his identity and what it means to be Japanese Canadian," she said in an email. Evans also shared how impactful it was for her to see the auditorium filled with Japanese Canadians, the Ottawa art com-

munity, and members of the general population who had all come together to learn from and celebrate Takeuchi's body of work and achievements. *Spaces in Between*, on display in the OAG's Salle Spencerville Gallery, offers visitors a glimpse into the life, experiences, and evolution of Takeuchi as an artist and as a man, arranged thematically: Abstraction, Conflict Work, Japanese Cultural Heritage, Internment Legacy, Graphic Art, Still Life. Video replay of Norman Takeuchi: A Panel can be found on the Ottawa Art Gallery YouTube page.

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town, I was thrilled and proud that ZenKitchen became a popular and beloved spot.

However, at the same time, I was afraid that people would label me as an Asian chef and assume that I would only serve Asian cuisine. Throughout my life, I've experienced this kind of labelling and judgment. People tend to judge me based on how I look rather than who I am on the inside.

Inside, I feel the same as everyone else, but because I look different, especially in a white-centric environment, sometimes people make assumptions about me.

**Micro-actions of rebellion**

I still am irritated when people ask where I'm from. I reply, "Toronto."

They say, "No, where were you born?" I say, "Toronto."

Then they ask, "Where were your parents born?" I say, "B.C."

They get annoyed and ask, "But where are you *really* from?!"

That's when I give in and say, "I'm of Japanese ancestry."

They say, "I knew it!"

They seem pleased, and I feel annoyed and tired of playing this game.

I felt the only way to express who I am and assert myself was through micro-actions of rebellion. I couldn't tell people, "I think you have a racist view" or say, "I'm Japanese Canadian,"

and walk away. This is part of my shame and being a people-pleaser, which runs deep.

**From shame to pride**

It resonated with me when Norman said his artwork goes from shame to pride. I believe it's everyone's struggle as a Japanese Canadian or anything that is visibly different from the norm of where they live.

Maybe younger Japanese Canadian generations are freer of shame, farther from it, but it's still in their DNA, past, and part of them. How do we break free? We need to transform it.

It's essential to acknowledge that racism existed and still exists within society and us and transform it like alchemists.

We need to create new things from a place of who we are, including our cultural heritage, without feeling ashamed. We need to remember our history, appreciate it, and move forward with open hearts to create from a new place.

**Bringing my identity**

I began including Japanese food I love with my spin at the restaurant, like *dengaku miso* glazed skewers, *takuan* pickles, *togarashi* seven-spice chips, and *sunomono* cucumber-wakame salad. It was fun hearing the cooks talking about Japanese items in

the kitchen. For example, saying, "We need to *mise* (*mise en place*/prep for service) more *dengaku*," "We need *takuan* on the line" (horizontal kitchen space for service), or "We're 86'd (out of) *togarashi* chips." I was proud that Japanese had made it into the kitchen lingo.

In 2012, I competed with a Japanese theme in Canada's prestigious Gold Medal Plates (GMP) Culinary Olympics competition. My childhood memories inspired my dish, and I incorporated all the colours, textures, tastes, and senses of my childhood, with Japanese food being a huge part.

Despite the abuse and shame I experienced growing up, I focused on the positive aspects of my upbringing for the plate. I aimed to capture my childhood's colours, textures, tastes, and sensations, using Japanese cuisine as a significant influence. I highlighted my memories of cooking with my mother and travelling in Japan with her.

In presenting my dish to the judges, I said it was a tribute to my late mother, who taught me about Japanese culture and cuisine. Winning the silver medal for the second year in a row, I felt a sense of pride standing on stage alongside the best chefs in the city.

**True healing**

The pride I experienced when the food I made won awards covered



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline now embraces her Japanese culture in the food she creates, as an act of love for herself and the people she makes the food for.

up the shame. Like a canvas, I covered up one layer with white before continuing to the next layer. We cover our past, not with shame, but with love, and move forward with a blank canvas.

We bring our whole selves to our art forms and lives. We don't leave a part behind that is shameful. When we can accept these parts, we can accept ourselves fully, enabling us to accept others.

This mindset facilitates true healing in our community when we accept people who are different and not like us as they are.

It's what we would have wanted for the Japanese Canadian

pioneers when they first arrived in Canada. A warm welcome, an appreciation of their unique differences and contributions they can make to the country, and belonging.

I believe each person who shows up authentically enables others to do the same, transforming our collective shame into pride.

We stand together as alchemists.

We look back and tell our Japanese Canadian ancestors, "It's ok now, not perfect, but better. I am ok, as I am. I am Japanese Canadian."

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