

# ARTIST AND INFLUENCE

1994

VOLUME XIII



HATCH-BILLOPS COLLECTION, INC.

Artist and Influence 1994

*Volume XIII*

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Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc.

491 Broadway, 7th floor  
New York City 10012

## Table of Contents

1	<b>Anthony Barboza</b>
	<i>Interview by Deba Patnaik</i>
13	<b>Linda Goode-Bryant</b>
	<i>Interview by Tony Whitfield</i>
29	<b>James W. Butcher</b>
	<i>A Profile by James V. Hatch</i>
37	<b>Harold Cromer</b>
	<i>Interview by Delilah Jackson</i>
71	<b>Daniel Dawson</b>
	<i>Interview by Robert Farris Thompson</i>
91	<b>Palmer Hayden</b>
	<i>Interview by James Adams</i>
107	<b>Langston Hughes</b>
	<i>Interview by Reuben &amp; Dorothy Silver</i>
133	<b>Lloyd McNeill</b>
	<i>Interview by Laurin Raiken</i>
153	<b>Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham</b>
	<i>Interviews by Tony Bruno &amp; Steve Kane</i>
177	<b>Helen Oji</b>
	<i>Interview by Jessica Hagedorn</i>
187	<b>Lloyd Oxendine</b>
	<i>Interview by Bliem Kern</i>
199	<b>Nitza Tufiño</b>
	<i>Interview by Linda Bryant</i>
213	<b>Ellis Wilson</b>
	<i>Interview by Camille Billops</i>
227	<b>Petra Barreras</b>
	<i>Interview by Paul Martínez</i>

## Poetry

<b>Doris Abramson</b>
<i>A Visit to the Nursing Home</i> 129
<b>Ednah Bethea Blalock</b>
<i>Transition</i> 27
<i>Capsule . . . Prognostic</i> 34
<i>Resolution</i> 131 <i>Privy</i> 211
<b>Anneka Buijs</b>
<i>Found Poem</i> 88 <i>Beach</i> 130
<i>Waking Up</i> 195 <i>To Create</i> 224
<b>William I. S. Castleberry</b>
<i>Island Man</i> 173
<b>Leo Hamalian</b>
<i>Suite for Sushanik</i> 65
<b>James V. Hatch</b>
<i>Morocco</i> 185
<i>Ego Sum, Catullus, Ego Sum</i> 225
<i>One Star</i> 233 <i>The Blue Sweetness</i> 234
<b>Jan Heissinger</b>
<i>Flyboy</i> 225
<b>Glenngo Allen King</b>
<i>poem #10</i> 129 <i>harmonica man</i> 131
<i>a map of africa</i> 184
<b>Barbara Lekatsas</b>
<i>Hit and Run</i> 185
<b>Lloyd McNeill</b>
<i>First Things First</i> 133
<i>I Will Die Alone</i> 133
<b>Veronica Mitchell</b>
<i>Epiphany at Head of the Meadow</i> 150
<i>Hello, When Was the Last Time I Saw You?</i> 209
<i>Belly Up</i> 172 <i>Asterperious</i> 210
<b>Suzanne Noguere</b>
<i>On a Duan Inkstone from the Late Ming</i> 10
<i>The Recitation</i> 10 <i>Views of Rome</i> 11
<b>William R. Reardon</b>
<i>And How Did You Get Your Education?</i> 151
<b>Steve Rosen</b>
<i>Quicksandphobia</i> 69
<i>Background Figure</i> 89
<i>Things Mean Other Things</i> 196
<b>Victoria Sullivan</b>
<i>Too Late</i> 69
<i>News of a Faraway Accident</i> 130
<i>It Is Our Nature</i> 234
<b>Marlene Tartaglion</b>
<i>Adam</i> 174



Jessica Hagedorn and Helen Oji

**Helen Oji**

Visual Artist

**Interviewer: Jessica Hagedorn**

May 16, 1993

**Helen, let's talk about your childhood. You talked about going to Sacramento State College. Were you raised in that area? Tell us about your family.**

I was born in Sacramento, California. My family moved to Yuba City shortly after that. Yuba City is famous for being the worst city in the United States. Rand-McNally lists it like that.

**Did you think it was the worst city in America?**

It's not really a city. It's a very small farming community. It's growing now, but at the time it was small. There was Yuba City and Marysville, which was across the bridge from Yuba City. Between the two towns, there were maybe 25,000 people.

My mother's name was Mitsue Kuwamoto Oji, and my father's was Henry Oji. He died in 1975. I have one sister, Jane Oji Schroeder, and she has two children. I have one daughter, Yoko.

**Your parents are Sansei, which means third generation Japanese-American.**

I am Sansei. My parents are Nisei, second generation Japanese-American.

**How did this affect your growing up in California?**

That they were interned in the camps?

**Well, we are jumping way ahead. In the community where you grew up, which was small, were there any other Japanese-Americans or were you the only family there?**

There were quite a few farmers who were Japanese-American. In fact, when I was very young I thought all Japanese-Americans were farmers.

**Did you go to Buddhist church?**

There was a local Buddhist church. Both my parents were Buddhist, however, I was not raised as a Buddhist. I went to the church mostly on festive occasions. My father farmed with his two brothers. The two other families lived down the street from me. As I grew up, my cousins and I played together. They were my best friends.

**Did you and your sister work on the farm?**

Not until we got older in high school. I worked on the tomato harvester. Sometimes I would work for another family and pick prunes to earn extra money. It wasn't fun but in a way it was fun.

**Did your mother work outside of the home?**

No, she took care of the household. She liked to sew.

**Are you the first visual artist in the family?**

Yes.

**Was it something you always knew you wanted to do?**

It was something I just did. I started drawing when I was about six or seven. I did a lot of drawings and portraits.

**Tell us about your family portraits.**

I did a series of what I thought was the perfect family. I did this series for a couple of years. I think I started when I was nine and I did them until I was eleven. Most of these families had dark brown hair and blue eyes. I liked the idea of blue eyes. These families were Italian. I don't know why. I did them with

colored pencils so they would have olive colored skin, and I liked the idea of having these light blue eyes and the dark hair.

**Did you think you were this all-American person, growing up in Yuba City, or did you think of yourself as an Asian-American person, or did you not ever think about it?**

I really thought I was an all-American person. And I really didn't think about it that much. I got along with everyone and most of the kids in my school were white. In my class in grade school, there was my cousin and four other friends who were Japanese-American. There were also some children who were Mexican. This was a very small school with maybe 200 in the whole school.

**When did you find out about your parents' being interned in a camp?**

I must have been around eleven. When I was younger they would talk about "camp" and I thought they meant "summer camp" because they would only talk about the mess hall and about this family and that family. They would only talk about the better moments. They never mentioned anything about the way they lived in these stables with the dirt floors or that they had to leave their homes and sell the majority of their belongings.

**Which camp were they in?**

Gila River in Arizona.

**Did they know each other then?**

They knew each other but they weren't married yet. They had first met in Santa Maria, California. My mother's parents were farmers and my father's parents were also farmers. Before they were interned my mother's father had a fairly good farming business and he had built a new house. My father's family had lost their money years before, and they were living with a friend of theirs, and then they were all interned. My parents were dating before they went to the camp.

**You found out about this slowly, unraveling this horrible history of "summer camp"?**

Yes. I did a term paper in high school about the camps. As I was doing research, I was really shocked and asked my parents about how their families lost everything and what it was like in the camps.

**Were you also shocked that they hadn't spoken about it except in this banal way, or was that something you sort of accepted? How did you feel about them never really sharing this with you?**

Well, I asked them, and they just said that it wasn't a very happy time. They always believed that one should only talk about good things, deal with the negative, but move forward and be positive.

**Did this hurt you?**

I can't remember how I felt as a fourteen-year-old. I think I just accepted what they told me. They told me that it was much more dangerous for them to be living in a regular community then, and it was safer for them to be in the camps, even though the conditions were poor there.

**As you found out about this, did it change or alter your perception of yourself as all-American?**

Yes, but I was really assimilated in the community that I lived in, so I had this understanding, but I wasn't depressed about it.

**When did you start seriously seeing yourself as an artist? Did your dreams of becoming an artist also grow, and did you start to take yourself more seriously?**

I did drawings, but I didn't really think about it. When I was thirteen I was introduced to art history by a teacher in the eighth grade. She taught this mini-art history course, and I learned about Van Gogh, Cezanne, Matisse, and El Greco. It was fascinating to me. Then I continued taking art in high school. At that time I was really encouraged to continue by my teachers.

**What about your family?**

It was a hobby for them. I don't think they took me seriously until I was in college. Then they sort of gave up.

**What was expected of you? You and your sister both went to college, right? Was higher education just something you did by rote or were they hoping you would go into medicine or law?**

Both of my parents wanted me to go to college but when I was younger my dad would say, "What's the point of going to college? You are getting married anyway." My mother wanted me to go to college so that I would meet a professional, "the right man." Later they both encouraged me to go to college.

**What did you start to study in college?**

I did art, but I minored in education because I thought I wanted to teach high school art, not knowing, when I did my student teaching, that I did not want to teach high school, or at least was not ready for it.

**What happened at college that you didn't fall into the expected pattern?**

While I was there I was influenced by several teachers who encouraged me to look at Japanese prints and look into my heritage. That's when I really feel I got direction in my work.

**Were these teachers Asian-American?**

Two were Asian-American, Jimmy Suzuki and Carlos Villa. Other important teachers were Jack Ogden, Sylvia Lark, Steve Kaltenbach, and Joan Moment. So there was a group of people at Sacramento State who really encouraged me to do what I was doing.

**Was this a exciting time for you, discovering all this?**

I was discovering a lot. At the time I was there I thought they were an interesting group of teachers.

**Was this in the early 70s?**

Yes, in 1972 I started doing these paintings based on exploring Japanese masks, reading Japanese myths, and looking at Ukiyo-e prints.

**You chose a college that was quite nearby. Was this a conscious decision to not leave the secure environment of home? Were you not interested in leaving?**

I guess not. I applied to San Jose State and Sacramento State, and I had a counselor who said, "Oh, the art department at Sacramento is very interesting. Why don't you try that one?" That's how I ended up there.

**What brought you to New York the first time?**

There were a few artists and curators from New York who visited our school. Marcia Tucker came out a few times, once a year at least. She came to lecture and had friends there. Nancy Spero and Leon Golub came out to visit. Then I had some instructors who had shows in New York, so I was curious. I came to New York the first time in 1974 and I just knew that some day I would live here. I fell in love with New York.

**So you came to New York and you went back to California. Were you working then?**

In 1974 I was still in graduate school. After I graduated I got a part-time teaching job in a junior college and also did some substitute teaching in a Sacramento high school, and that cured me.

**The early paintings that we saw of the pig and of the women are sort of narrative paintings. You did say that you were exploring your sexuality. I find them very erotically charged and dark. You have some paintings where there is this demon in the background who visits this woman. You said that they were based on Japanese mythology, but besides the teachers' turning you on to looking at this work, where you do think this darkness came from? It's so very different from what you are doing now.**

All these women in the paintings are me. In fairy tales there is always a dark side to the story, and I was exploring those issues in myself. For me it was like being an actor or role playing, acting out a character in a myth. I was also looking at a lot of Japanese films like *Kwaidan*, and there is always this dark side to something. That was very intriguing to me.

**Were you inspired mainly by visual images like film, or did you read a lot of text, and were some of those ideas influenced by words?**

I think I read myths, and then some fairy tales, but I was looking at the Ukiyo-e prints and films, and then just pictures in books. I looked at pictures of the Noh theatre or Kabuki. Almost anything that had to do with the Japanese tradition.

**In the 70s there was an active movement in the Bay area among artists of color, in all mediums. Did you know anything about that? Did Carlos Villa ever talk about it? Were you curious to go to the Bay area?**

I knew something about the movement in the Bay Area but not that much. I would go to the Bay area. Carlos had a few events there that I attended. He did these huge, beautiful feather capes with chicken bones and broken glass. He did performances and was a wonderful artist. He hung out with a group of Samoan artists, and they commuted to Sac State with Carlos. They liked to party.

**Was that something that was also intriguing to you?**

It was. I thought about moving to San Francisco, but then I went back to New York a second time in the beginning of 1976, and then I decided to move to New York. If I was going to move to a big city, it should be New York. I loved the galleries, the museums, and the theatre here.

**So you moved here in 1976?**

Yes.

**Were you married then?**

I got married right before we moved here.

**You are married to Alan Kikuchi, who was a photographer at the time.**

I met Alan at an art gallery while I was at Sac State, and he was a student in art at UC Davis. We collaborated on some photo projects.

**Was that hard, both of you being visual artists? Did you ever feel like you were competing with your mate?**

Not really; there was a nice exchange that went along with our work. He used to deal more with photography. Now he is into computer graphics. He started out being a painter, and he eventually gravitated towards photography. He explored similar issues like being Asian-American, so we had a lot in common and we did photo projects together.

**Did you have a gallery soon after your move to New York?**

No.

**When did you get hooked up with Monique Knowlton?**

In 1980. I was doing the kimono paintings and I had a show at the Drawing Center. The show was called "Twelve by Twelve." I used to go to Monique's gallery on a regular basis, and eventually I asked her if I could show her my work. I sent her some slides, and a few days later she called me and told me that she really liked the work and wanted to come to my studio. She came to my studio and also went to see the work at the Drawing Center. Monique began handling my work after that show.

**You were with her until when?**

I was there until 1985.

There was this weird time in the 80s with the big art-market boom, and you were kind of on the fringe of that. You had quite a lot of success with the kimono paintings. Then you decided to take this big leap and change. You wanted to do these volcano paintings. I remember that period very well, and I love the volcano paintings a lot. You took this risk and it was not financially successful. Then your dealer closed down. Why didn't those paintings sell?

People were interested in the large drawings, but they couldn't figure out a way to mount them on anything. The large charcoal drawings would have to be under glass, and no one wanted to deal with them. That was the excuse I got. I don't know why it didn't work. I did a series of prints of exploding volcanoes also, and they were not that successful either. I had some tamer ones of craters with water inside the craters, and those were successful commercially. Also people don't like artists who change. Collectors want artists who do the same kind of work or something that is more of a linear kind of progression, rather than something so abruptly different. Also, all my drawings were huge—they were eight-by twelve feet.

In 1983 you and I did Peachfish, which was a lot of fun. I really loved that collaboration. I had asked you to perform one line or something, and since then you have been working with different performance artists. You worked with Urban Bush Women three times.

I designed a set for Reheat at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, and then there was Song of Lawino. The new piece, Womb Wars, was recently performed at The Kitchen.

Then you worked with Laurie Carlos on Painted Tooth. That was done at the Mulberry Street Theatre.

Yes, I designed the set and had a cameo role in it.

**Do you enjoy this process which is much more public and collaborative and sometimes involves more than one person that you are working with? Do you like the business and the noise of it?**

At first I was reluctant. "I'm just a painter." Now I am getting to do more collaborative work, and I like the balance of being in my studio by myself and painting and then occasionally doing these sets. Luckily, I have liked all the collaborations.

For example, in *Womb Wars*, which is most recent, did you and Jawole sit there and discuss having the scrim, or did that all come out of your head, and then she said, "Go ahead"? Are those very deliberate connections to her choreography?

Her initial idea was to have a scrim made. She didn't know what the image would be. The critic called it "a sun-drenched landscape." The title of the piece was "LifeDance III . . . The Empress" (*Womb Wars*), and she had specific colors in

mind, like reds, oranges, pinks, all the earth tones. Also, she gave me specific words like "strip mining" and "taking away." The piece dealt with the oppression of women and reproductive rights, and it is very autobiographical as well. So those were the key words that she gave me. She leaves things pretty open as far as imagery goes.

**What about the table?**

Jawole gave me a tape of the piece in progress. In this particular tape there was this square table. I liked the idea of this nice-sized reddish table. There was a beige telephone on it. The idea of the dolls started out as a wall hanging, but then we thought about putting them around the table instead.

For me the piece also has an altar feeling to it. Is this coming from Jawole and the company, or is this something you are also interested in?

It is like an altar, but it wasn't intended to be that way. I am interested in altars and placing objects that mean something in a space.

**Your new paintings have an absence of people. They are objects like food or teapots, and they are your new still lifes. Is this liberating for you to not work with figures?**

Yes, I feel that there is a certain way that people read a figure, in my work, an Asian figure. I wanted my work to be personal yet more about the everyday. I started painting still lifes after designing the set for *Song of Lawino*. Each performer and person involved with the piece placed a personal object on the altar. Placing everyday objects on the altar took on new meaning for me. The objects were the simplest things, yet they meant so much. I place objects like food, teapots, cups, glasses on a table in my studio. Some of the food paintings are carefully arranged and painted in a more deliberate manner. Other objects are studied and are associated as symbols and utilized more abstractly.

**You are involved with Godzilla and you also have had some dealings with other groups. Do you feel that groups like this are necessary in the art world today?**

I think there is a need for art groups like Godzilla for empowerment, networking, or advocating issues. I haven't been very active with Godzilla recently, for the last few months since the show at Artists Space. But it's like Godzilla meeting with David Ross at the Whitney Museum. Some people say that the group opened his eyes to other ways of seeing the art world. Just making the Asian presence felt. Like the Guerrilla Girls are sort of poking at the art world and keeping everyone in check. I think that's what their purpose is.

**Do you always see yourself painting and living in New York?**

For the near future, yes. I have considered moving out at one point, but I can't see living anywhere else.

**What do you wish I had asked you in this interview?**

I don't know.

**When you met with the Whitney Museum, what was promised?**

I sat through the meeting and David Ross was very cordial and gave promising comments. We spoke about the previous Biennial and how there were no Asian-Americans represented, other than in video or film. There weren't any sculptors or painters or installation artists who were Asian-American. We addressed that issue to him and he said, "Well, we haven't seen any. Send the slides in," or something like that. "Okay, we will gather at this point ten artists that we think you should see." There was a committee formed and we sent him ten bodies of work.

Were any of them included in the Biennial?

Maybe Byron Kim.

The membership of Godzilla does not include video artists, does it?

It does now. When Godzilla first began, the people who started it were Margo Machida, Bing Lee, and Ken Chu. Initially they thought Godzilla would be for Asian-American painters, sculptors, curators, art writers, and administrators. At the beginning they did not want to include any performance artists or video artists. I think it's very open now. They say the membership is growing, but its membership is that whoever is interested goes to the meetings. It started out with three people and then the core group grew to be fifteen which came up with the name Godzilla. We used to have the meetings at our houses until it got too big. It started out as a smaller meeting discussing the first newsletter, seeing some art from members, and socializing. We had all these pot luck dinners.

People in Godzilla come from very diverse backgrounds. Some of the artists are much more politically based, and some of the artists go just to be social and find out what's going on. The official title of the group is "Godzilla Asian-American Art Network." There is a national newsletter that's put out quarterly. It has a listing of all the shows that include Asian-Americans. There is not much documentation on Asian-American artists, especially in contemporary art. The written documentation is needed.

I want to ask you about the symbols that you are using in your paintings. How can the intellectual conversation that's going on in your own mind be disseminated to your public?

I think about the objects for a very long time and I do a lot of research on these objects, like the volcano, the clock, the idea of a necklace, pearls. I am trying to build up a visual vocabulary. They are all symbols for some things that mean a lot to me. I do want to communicate something about how I feel, but also I am open about having people react to these symbols.

Does it bother you that the critic saw your set as "a sun-drenched landscape" as opposed to a volcano?

I thought it was very clear that it was this volcano.

I could see why she would read it as a landscape, because it was quite abstract and the colors. I don't know if this matters to you or not.

I think it is necessary that there is a note in the program that says, "Set designed by Helen Oji as part of her Volcano Series," just to identify it.

I don't think it can hurt. There is no need to be too obscure. The critic's interpretation of the volcano could be very different from Helen's attachment to it.

I am trying to work on my titles so that they have more meaning in relationship to the painting. I am dealing with a lot of symbols right now. I write about my work, but having to clarify my work through lots of writing for the public I have never done. Dealing with politics consciously in art is not one of my stronger points. I think some other artists can express it better than me, and I can express something about painting better.

I do write about my work but I don't like my writing. To give some sort of indication of what I'm thinking about, the closest I can get to that is with my titles. Sometimes I just paint and it doesn't have a title.