

Claudia Kogachi talks to her obaachan (grandmother) on Skype every day, but in recent months has been unable to visit her at home in Oahu, Hawai‘i, due to Covid-related border restrictions. In her large-scale rug work for Te Tuhi, Kogachi remembers the most recent visit with her mother, last summer, and some of the routine tasks that make up the days at her obaachan’s house—cleaning the freezer out, rolling musubi (spam sushi), barbecuing galbi / 갈비 (Korean short ribs) for meals—activities running in parallel to ongoing conversations between the women of three generations. The work registers a relationship between social exchange, food, attentiveness, and physical labour. While both Kogachi and her obaachan are frequently preoccupied with practical tasks, in this work such concentration and work might also be understood as forms of familial contact, ways of staying in touch across distance.

Claudia Kogachi was born in Japan (Awaji-Shima) and graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2018. She was recently part of Artspace Aotearoa’s *The New Artists’ Show*. Other recent exhibitions include *Everyone Has A Horse Phase* (2020), Sanderson Contemporary, Tāmaki Makaurau and *Uncle Gagi* (2020), play_station space, Pōneke Wellington.

Conversations while working

The last time Claudia Kogachi visited her obaachan (grandmother) in Oahu, Hawai‘i, was late last summer. Kogachi’s series of rugs are based on photos she took during that visit, images she returned to often back in Tāmaki Makaurau in the months following, during an extended period of separation due to Covid-related border restrictions. Like many family members living apart at this time, Kogachi and her obaachan are still able to speak on Skype every day. Yet despite growing familiarity with online contact, there is a strong awareness of the intense physical and emotional energy required to maintain a connection through screens, with time delays affecting the dialogue, sitting face-to-face in a way that would feel strange were they in the same room.

In *Obaachan during the lockdown, Wahiawā, Hawai‘i, 2020*, the ordinary daily tasks Kogachi’s photos depict—cleaning the freezer out, rolling musubi (spam sushi), barbecuing kalbi 갈비 (Korean short ribs) for meals—are scaled up, so that they hold the entire space of the wall. These works might be thought of as huge banners, welcoming as you enter Te Tuhi, a community space where making, family, the sharing of food and time, is fundamental to the experience of art. Standing in front of them, I think also of the many forms that intimate relationships take, the spaces we share at home, conversations had while cooking, hosting; when the freezer breaks down or while a meal is being prepared. I recognise the concentration in the movements, but also an openness to being interrupted, or, to continuing working in parallel with what is being said. For my own family,

the majority of the time we now spend together goes something like this: we meet, prepare food, maybe do something necessary in the vegetable garden like move the compost, eat the food together, clear up. We make little eye contact, focus on what is being done, while working closely.

This work registers a relationship between social exchange, attentiveness, and physical labour. While both Kogachi and her obaachan are frequently preoccupied with practical tasks, in these rugs such work could be read as a form of familial contact, a way of staying in touch across distance. Each of the panels represents an activity that takes up a significant amount of the time they spend together. As an artist, Kogachi shares her obaachan's hand-making skills, attention to detail, and the capacity to concentrate for long periods of time. Though they make very different things, there is a connection in the repetitive gestures, and in the basic understanding that through making, you build and sustain relationships.

Making these rugs involves a process called 'rug-tufting', which for Kogachi has been a commitment of weeks. The resulting work is a record of that energy, the weight of the rug-tufting gun that she uses, the time spent crouching or up a ladder to complete the upper heights of each image. Each length of wool is individually fired through the netting base, from the back, with a handheld rug-tufting machine. A layer of adhesive latex across the back of the work holds the wool in place, while the front of the work is trimmed to achieve the required length or texture. Until recently Kogachi has worked mainly with paint. When the acrylics she uses became hard to get during lockdown, she decided to try rug making—the equipment could be easily ordered online, and she taught herself the process through YouTube videos.

Kogachi's works are predominantly autobiographical, often including her extended family. While she was born in Japan, her grandparents live in Hawai'i, having moved there from Japan to work in pineapple plantations. Since the 1880s, the pineapple industry had brought a large number of people from Japan to Hawai'i seeking work, and many Japanese families settled permanently. Visiting her grandparents as a child, Kogachi spent time in Hawai'i, later living and studying there for a period. Spam musubi, as featured in the middle rug panel, is a favourite food that she has continued to make and eat since.

The dish holds its own history. Spam, the main ingredient in musubi, initially came to Hawai'i in WWII with the US military. As a canned, preserved meat it was both transportable and lasting; it was served as rations for the soldiers, and was later distributed widely by the US government. An early form of musubi was created in Japanese internment camps, where many people of Japanese descent in the US were made to relocate during the war. Over time it evolved into its contemporary

form in Hawai‘i: a slice of grilled spam on top of rice, wrapped together with nori. Robert Ji-Song Ku, author of *Dubious Gastronomy: The cultural politics of eating Asian in the USA* (University of Hawai‘i, 2014) has written on the complexity of this relationship: a popular Hawaiian dish that relates to a history of food shortage and US dominance in the region, and prolonged military presence there after the war had ended.

In each of these works the perspective shifts. Rather than a front-on portrait, these are the specific viewpoints of the artist, at home with her obaachan. Rather than illustrating a scene for the viewer, they recall something of how it feels to be in the same room, standing beside someone as they barbeque or talking through what to keep when the freezer breaks down. An intergenerational relationship is a vital part of the work. Kogachi’s mother, also on that visit, may be somewhere in the background, perhaps speaking, helping or resting. While the rugs don’t show us this scene in its entirety, or with the detail of a photo, they exist in vivid connection with this family and this home. In as much as they are ‘finished’, they maintain a sense of privacy, of work to be done, and, of the conversation continuing.

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