

# KEN OKIISHI: A MODEL CHILDHOOD

The Art Gallery, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), is proud to present *Ken Okiishi: A Model Childhood*. In this major exhibition, Okiishi meditates on the fraught legacy of Japanese-American history and the model minority myth in the larger contexts of American, global and continuously rewritten fragments of Asian-American history.

The exhibition focuses on ruptures and paradigm shifts that destroy not only continuity in living one's life, but the ability to think in coherent streams of thought, and conjectures that these modes of dis-formation are important central dis-organizing principles of writing American history. In *A Model Childhood*, Okiishi approaches history through the lens of family and oral history, bringing both an intimacy and complexity to official narratives. Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Okiishi's grandfather, following a frantic phone call from his brother, whose house had just been searched by the Honolulu police looking for connections to Japan, decided to suddenly unload all traces of the family's Japanese possessions by dumping them into Māmala Bay. This leitmotif of American identity formation haunts what ensues.

In May of 2018, with this family history heavy on the mind, and a distinct sense of both the return of historical specters that were supposed to be fully submerged in the past and a profound sense of invisibility in American society and history in general, Okiishi decided to drive one carload of contents of his childhood belongings through the American landscape for an exhibition in Los Angeles. At the beginning of the journey, it was unclear what would happen with these objects when he arrived in LA, but, in a turn of events that can best be described as semi-conscious, Okiishi's Google-map itinerary ended up going through the site of the Topaz War Relocation Center, a concentration camp in Delta, Utah—and the meticulously archived plastic storage bins and cardboard boxes of *a model childhood* on the mainland became charged with a shattered history.

This exhibition was curated by Maika Pollack.

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## Ken Okiishi

(Born 1978 in Ames, Iowa. Lives and works in New York and Berlin.)

Recent solo exhibitions include: *A Model Childhood*, Pilar Corrias, London (2019) and *Reena Spaulings*, Fine Art, Los Angeles (2018); *Being and/or Time*, Reena Spaulings, New York (2017); *gestures, data, feedback*, Take Ninagawa, Tokyo (2015); *Screen Presence*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2014); *List Projects: Ken Okiishi*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts (2013). Recent group exhibitions include: *Manifesta 13*, Marseille (2020); *Ice and Fire*, The Kitchen, New York (2020); *Being Modern: MoMA in Paris*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France (2017); *PLEIN\_ECRAN*, La Station, Nice, France (2016); *Performing Time*, Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai (2016); *La Collection Westreich Wagner*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2016); *Cut to Swipe*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015); *Full of Peril and Weirdness*, M Woods, Beijing, China (2015); *Over you/you*, 31<sup>st</sup> Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia (2015); *Whitney Biennial 2014*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2014); *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany (2013); *Liebe ist Kälter als das Kapital*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2013). Okiishi's most recent film, *Vital Behaviors*, had its US premiere at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, (2021).

# ***A Model Childhood, the Mainland (Ames, Iowa), circa 1978–2001, 2018***

HD video, DVD family history video for insurance purposes, vinyl print, PLA 3D prints, data point cloud generated by 3D scan and one carload of personal effects transported from the Okiishi family basement, Ames, Iowa

*A Model Childhood the Mainland (Ames, Iowa), circa 1978–2001*, consists of several poetically interlocking parts: A display of Okiishi's childhood belongings (1978–2001), meticulously archived by his parents, who had settled in the university town of Ames, Iowa in the late 1950s; A video, projected on and through this childhood archive, which shows a view of walking through the ruins of the Topaz War Relocation Center, a concentration camp in Delta, Utah, as well as an animation showing a forensic scan of the basement of Okiishi's family home set into a desert landscape, documenting the family's basement archive before the removal of the section dedicated to Ken's childhood; A large banner made from a photograph of a Boys' Day memento from 1940—Okiishi's father as an infant, posed amid fifty Japanese dolls depicting the life of a warrior which were thrown into the ocean upon the threat of internment a year later; A family history video for insurance purposes, made by the artist's mother, documenting every object in the Okiishi household circa 2009.

Since William Henry Fox Talbot's invention of the Talbotype, photography (and later video) has been used to document household possessions. This found object *Bildungsroman* tells the story of an artist coming into being. From a childhood in Ames, Iowa in the late 1970s to 1990s, full of piano lessons, magic tricks and poetry readings, to a departure for Cooper Union in New York City, the items are a self-portrait of *a model childhood*—a childhood meant to show the world an idealized reality. Yet, it is conspicuous both for what it contains, and also what is absent. Haunting this archive is the banner of the artist's father among fifty Japanese Boys' Day dolls, from a photograph taken in 1940. These and other family possessions from Japan were thrown into Māmala Bay by the artist's grandfather who, as young father employed as a welder at Pearl Harbor, following the bombing of his workplace, was convinced that the objects would over-identify him as *Japanese* and, consequently, cause him to be shipped off to a concentration camp. These lost objects are both missing from the family inventory, and deeply present psychologically, for multiple generations of Americans who become as if outsiders in their own homes.

# *A Model Childhood, the Mainland* *circa 2018, 2018*

4k video (color, silent), 24:32 min.

*A Model Childhood, the Mainland circa 2018*, is a photographic slideshow of Okiishi's cross-country trip carrying the objects from his childhood home. With more than 300 photographic images of the American landscape, the work echoes a vernacular established by Robert Frank's iconic *The Americans*, tracing a journey through American motels, industry, and uninterrupted stretches of highway with a critical eye.

Okiishi's trip included the site of the former Topaz Relocation Center, near Delta, Utah. Of the journey he writes:

[I was] visiting the site that was held over my father's generation (children at the time, carried through into adult subject formation) as the threat of non-compliance to strict and narrow parameters of being a *good American* in the most violent form of that idea. Going to Topaz was, in a way, puncturing the fiction of power (Elaine Scarry's term) in the very political moment when its real possibility of reinvigorated methods was becoming all too real in that inescapable sense of knowing but unable to do anything other than witness and survive . . .

Witnessing the ruins and fragments of the camp appearing in front of me suddenly out of a barren landscape is like the way you breathe out suddenly when hit with a difficult subject/stream of thoughts. The usual question that so many ask about who was in or not in the camps, while obviously significant, in my experience can also mask an important issue: that everyone suffers from this history that has never been properly worked through and it continues to be played out on the faces and bodies of all Asian Americans up to and including in the present.

*A Model Childhood* shows a process whereby the modes of landscape and road trip photography are recoded via an eye that no longer sees the ideological function of those modes of image production as related to American *expanse* and *freedom*.

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