

# House of Seiko

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Arthur Okamura

Returnings

Dec 9, 2023 - January 28, 2024

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Arthur Okamura (1932-2009)

Composed around a 1972 exhibition held at the Charles Feingarten Gallery in Los Angeles, Returnings at House of Seiko is a condensed survey of Arthur's work from 1959 to 1972 and the artist's first showing in eleven years.

In his own words, as published in a chapbook to accompany the 1972 Feingarten exhibition:

“This exhibit of books, prints, and paintings forms, in sequence, some of the last five years; showing, perhaps, some relationship to my zazen practice, which has gone on for three years with my wife, some friends, some students and a teacher - Shunryu Suzuki Roshi who died in December 1971.

A few years ago, I felt a need to stop painting, but my habit (Instinct? Intuition? Pleasure?) is to make art, so I began to work at some new forms for me such as sewn banners, etchings, small cast bronze sculptures, polaroid lights and a series of drawings for a book. In each case close collaboration with other people was essential.

The drawings were of clusters of tiny people - something to be held in a space, a breath. The original drawings were exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art in April - May 1968. Publishers were interested but it ended there until Shambala Publications, Berkeley, made a commitment to publish them. About then my old friend Robert Creeley was in town. The occasion was warm and close. I asked Bob to look at the drawings & consider writing something to be with them. He sent a poem that delighted me in the way it paralleled and extended the scope of the drawings and set the book.

The oil paintings are recent. They come from the energy and vibration of this western spirit place where I live.”

Press release by Ted Barrow:

Arthur Okamura used to tell a story about the internment camp in Colorado where he was forcibly moved with his family during World War II. Having grown up in Long Beach and Compton, Colorado, seemed like the Wild West to a Californian kid raised on cartoons and comics; the soldiers seemed like cowboys. One morning, the 12-year-old Arthur asked the cowboy guard when the Indians were coming. The cowboy turned to the kid and said, “You’re the Indians.”

Don’t risk reading too much into this exchange. It might simply be a story perfected in social settings over time to illustrate this point: identity, for Okamura, was illusory. Artist, party-trickster, teacher, Zen student, painter, etcher, sculptor, Japanese-American, and self-described “abstract-realist.” The more you list his titles, the more complicated each mask gets. So much of what he did — including pool, table tennis, and fencing — became a physical extension of his art practice, energized negative space.

“Returnings” [Okamura’s first gallery show in eleven years] tracks a critical pivot in Arthur’s life and practice. In 1956, Arthur and his young wife and first child moved from Chicago to San Francisco. A few years later, they moved to Bolinas, the same year from which the 1959 diamond-shaped Smothered Tree in a Warm Fog comes. A tawny, warm layer of khaki and olive greens spreads over an orange and red first layer. Diamond shapes demand equipoise, and one soon senses a balanced formal order of complex organic forms and simple geometric shapes. Malevich and Mondrian might make strange bedfellows anywhere else but in Bolinas, but this place teeters on the other side of the San Andreas Fault, more part of Asia than California, only tethered to the continent by the fog, eucalyptus, and moss of West Marin.

The graphic and textual etchings, some of which ended up in a book he collaborated on with the poet Robert Creeley, are visionary in the vein of William Blake and Edward Lear. Look closely. Concurrent with Arthur’s work in this decade are his studies with Shunryu Suzuki, who came to San Francisco in 1959, attracting a small, fervent group of Zen students, including Arthur and his friend and neighbor Joanne Kyger. Beginner’s mind, seeing all phenomena as if for the first time with no prior hang-ups, inflected Arthur’s art practice thereafter.

Okamura built up a lexicon of recurrent motifs during his 50 years of life in Bolinas. Monarch butterflies, fish, rocks, dogs, and Bolinas fog: just a few of his potent terms. Beach Rocks, 1972, faces Smothered Tree across the gallery, bookending the show. Paintings of rocks, whether they be 19th century Yosemite or 17th century Qing dynasty, connect the constellation of Arthur’s eclectic lineage, fusing east and west. Yellow lines pulsate between sand and rocks, denoting, as Okamura described, “the energy and vibration of this western spirit place where I live.” Could they be ghostly traces of water catching the sun? A mind-made pattern? Television static? Somewhere between Agate Beach, where he walked his dog daily, and Ryoanji, this impromptu rock garden is at once quotidian and monumental without dualistic thought: “realist abstraction.” Painted the year after Suzuki Roshi’s death, Beach Rocks carries forth his teacher’s unadorned Zen lessons.

Arthur Okamura's multivalent and ludic art practice encompassed even his koan-like pronouncements as a teacher. "Every mark says something," he told Carlos Villa at SFAI in 2007. "Too many words says nothing," he added, laughing. Attend to Okamura's eloquent marks. You will learn of lifelong departures and returnings.

Okamura built up a lexicon of recurrent motifs during his 50 years of life in Bolinas. Monarch butterflies, fish, rocks, dogs, and Bolinas fog: just a few of his potent terms. *Beach Rocks*, 1972, faces *Smothered Tree* across the gallery, bookending the show. Paintings of rocks, whether they be 19th century Yosemite or 17th century Qing dynasty, connect the constellation of Arthur's eclectic lineage, fusing east and west. Yellow lines pulsate between sand and rocks denoting, as Okamura described, "the energy and vibration of this western spirit place where I live." Could they be ghostly traces of water catching the sun? A mind-made pattern? Television static? Somewhere between Agate Beach, where he walked his dog daily, and Ryoanji, this impromptu rock garden is at once quotidian and monumental without dualistic thought: "realist abstraction." Painted the year after Suzuki Roshi's death, *Beach Rocks* carries forth his teacher's unadorned Zen lessons.

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## Installation Documentation



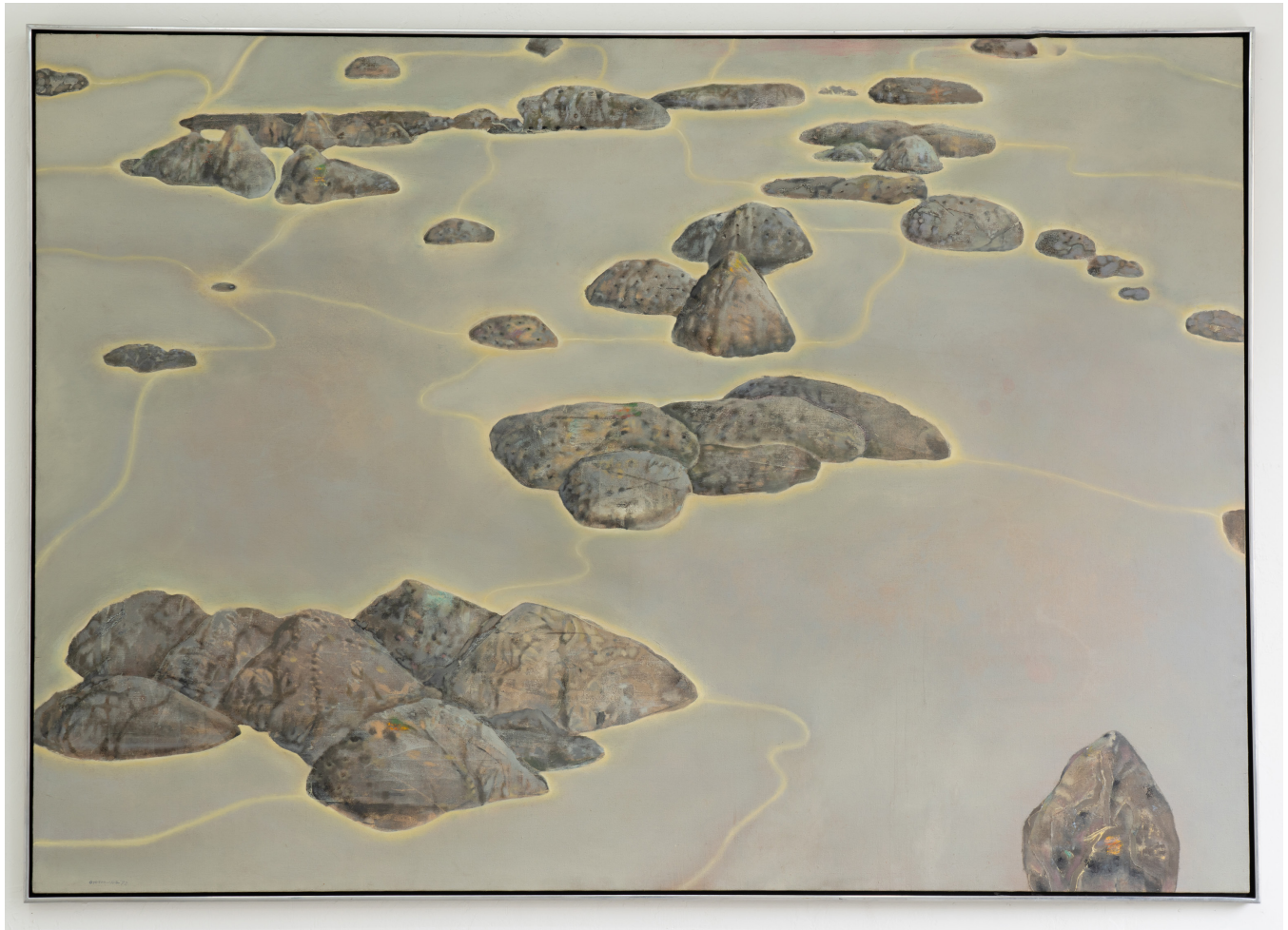








## Checklist



Beach Rocks, 1972

oil on canvas

48 x 68 inches





Smothered Tree in a Warm Fog , 1959

oil on canvas

51 x 51 inches





Untitled (figures coupling), c. 1966

etching on paper

Artist Proof

18 5/8 x 12 3/4 inches (sheet)





Untitled (fan form), State II, 1967

etching on paper

Trial Proof

15 x 11 inches (sheet)





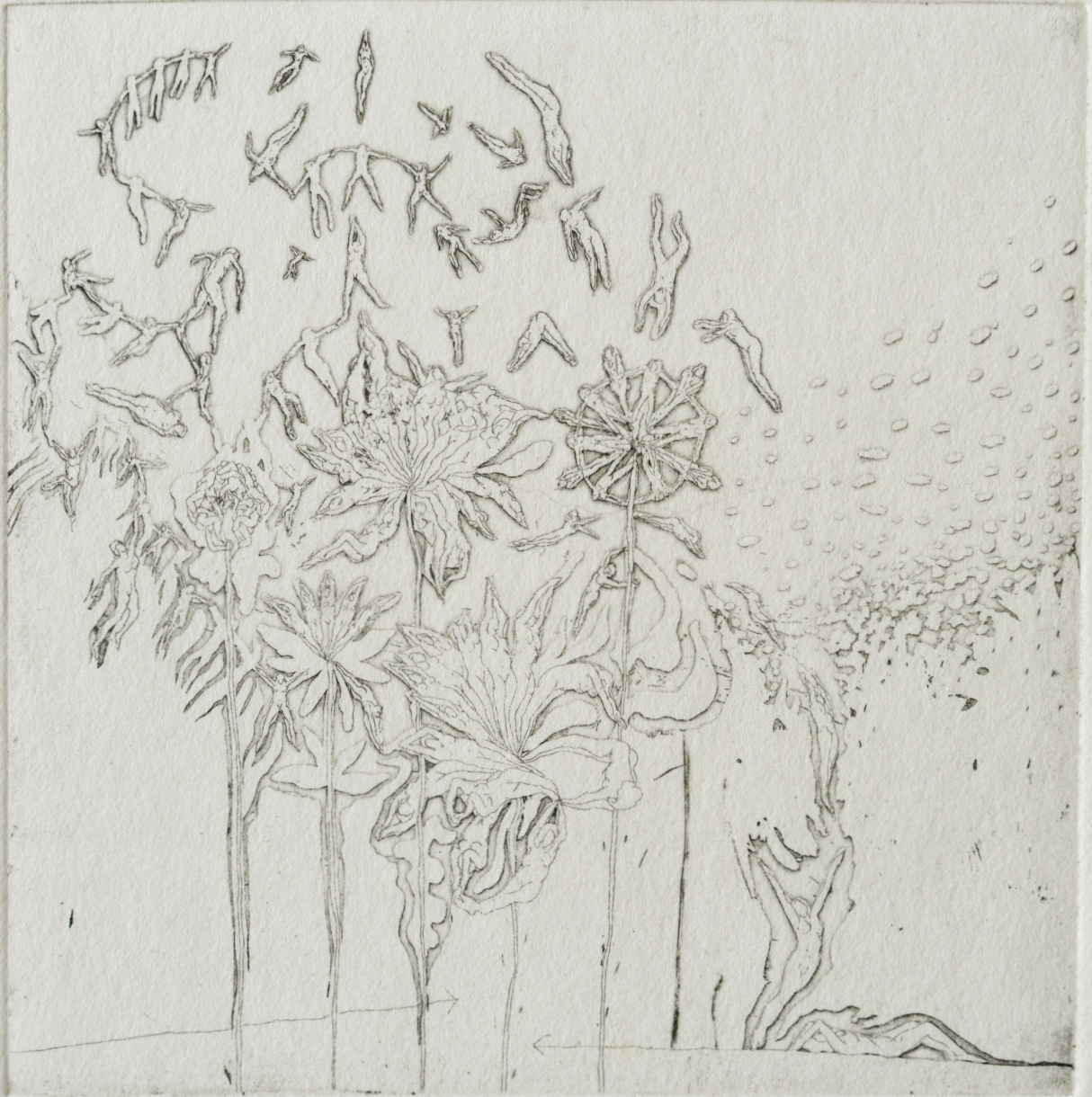


Garden, 1967

etching on paper

edition I of 20

9 1/2 x 10 1/4 inches (sheet)



1/20 GARDEN

OKAMURA 67

## Artist Bio & CV

# Arthur Okamura

February 24, 1932 - July 10, 2009

born: Long Beach, California

## Education:

Art Institute of Chicago, 1950 - 1954

Yale School of Art, 1954

## Bio:

Okamura was born in Long Beach, California, on February 24, 1932.

Arthur Okamura was an American artist who worked in drawing, painting, and printmaking. He lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was Professor Emeritus at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, California. His work is in the permanent collections at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Whitney Museum in New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He is associated with the San Francisco Renaissance.

During World War II, as a child, Okamura and his family were relocated to the Granada War Relocation Center in southeast Colorado. As a result of Executive Order 9066, the United States government forced the relocation of many American residents of Japanese ancestry to a Japanese-American internment camp.

# Arthur Okamura

CV

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS:

Rockefeller Chapel, University of Chicago  
Santa Barbara Museum  
Art Institute of Chicago  
Whitney Museum of Art  
San Francisco Museum of Art  
University of Illinois  
Borg Warner Collection, Chicago, IL  
Phoenix Art Museum  
Illinois State Normal  
Container Corporation of America  
National Society of Arts and Letters  
Johnson Wax Collection  
Joseph Hirschhorn Collection  
U.S. Steel Service Institute  
Corcoran Museum  
Whitney Museum  
Miles Laboratory  
Auchenbach Foundation  
California Palace of the Legion of Honor  
California College of Arts & Crafts  
Kalamazoo College  
National Collection of Fine Arts  
Smithsonian Institution  
Illinois Bell Telephone  
Stanford University Collection  
University of Southern Idaho  
Cincinnati Art Museum  
Oakland Art Museum  
United Gas & Pipeline Company, Dallas, TX  
Denver Art Museum

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

Frank Ryan Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1953  
La Boutique, Chicago, IL, 1953,1954  
Feingarten Galleries, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, LA, 1956-1976  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1958

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1961  
Calhoun Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1962  
University of Utah, 1964  
M. Knoedler & Company, NY, 1965  
Hanson Gallery, San Francisco, 1964-1968  
College of Holy Names, Oakland, 1966  
Drawings, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1968  
Hanson Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, 1971  
Govett Brewster Gallery, New Zealand, 1971  
University of Southern Idaho, 1972  
California College of Arts & Crafts, Oakland, 1972  
Kent State University, Kent, OH, 1973  
Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1973  
Commonwealth, Bolinas, CA, 1980  
Stinson Beach Art Center, 1983  
Ruth Braunstein Gallery, SF, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1994  
Retrospective: "Selections From a Lifetime of Art," 1995  
Concurrently at the Bolinas Museum and at the Claudia Chaplin Gallery, Stinson Beach, CA  
"Early Paintings," Vorpahl Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1996  
"Recent Bolinas Landscapes," Commonwealth - 20th Anniversary  
Celebration, Bolinas, CA, September 1996  
House of Seiko, December 2023

#### EXHIBITIONS:

The Art Institute of Chicago Annuals, 1951-1954  
Museum of Modern Art, NY, 1954  
Downtown Gallery, NY  
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art  
University of Washington, Seattle, 1955  
Ravinia Art Festival, Highland Park, IL  
American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago  
Contemporary Americans, LA County Museum Art  
In Asia and the West, San Francisco Museum  
Contemporary American Painting, Art Institute of Chicago  
Society of Contemporary Art, Art Institute of Chicago  
West Coast Painters, American Federation of Art  
San Francisco Annual, San Francisco Museum  
Contemporary Americans, University of Nebraska  
Recent Acquisitions, Denver Museum  
Drawings of California Artists, Sponsored by U.S. Information Center, Berlin, Cologne, Germany, 1958-1959  
New Talent, American Federation of Art, 1959  
Dallas Museum of Art, 1959

Fresh Paint, De Young Museum, San Francisco, 1958  
Knoedler Gallery, NY, 1959  
Winter Invitational, California Palace of the Legion of Honor 1959  
Whitney Museum, NY, 1960  
Sculpture and Drawing, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1961  
Great by Greats, Time Life Building, NY, 1961  
Whitney Annual, 1962,1963,1964  
Forty Artists Under Forty, Whitney Museum, 1962  
Bay Area Artists, San Francisco Museum, 1962  
Recent Collections by Friends of the Whitney, Whitney Museum 1964  
Ravinia Art Festival, Lake Forest, IL 1964  
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. 1964  
Pacific Heritage, LA County Museum 1965  
SECA Exhibit, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1966  
Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, 1966  
Painters Behind Painters, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1967  
Pittsburgh International Carnegie Institute, 1967  
Takashima 1970 Exposition, Osaka/Tokyo, Japan, 1970  
Bay Area Art Faculties, College of Marin, 1970  
Asian Artists, Oakland Museum, 1971  
Imaginary Painting from S.F. California State, University of San Jose, 1972  
"A Sense of Place" Exhibit. Josln Nebraska Art Museum. 1973  
Four from CCAC, Berkeley Art Center, 1974  
Falkirk Connnunity Cultural Center, San Rafael, CA, 1975  
Two-Person Show with Joan Rosenbaum, Walnut Creek Art Center, 1975  
"Zen Gardens, San Jose State University, 1976  
Tropical Visions, St. Mary's College, 1989  
Tropic Exotic, Trans America Pyramid, SF, 1986  
"On The Trail," Claudia Chaplin Gallery, Stinson Beach, CA, 1987  
"Opening Show," Bolinas Museum, 1988  
"Miniature Show," Bolinas Museum, 1990  
"In The Garden," Bolinas Museum, 1991  
"60 Plus: Older Artists of West Marin," Bolinas Museum, 1993  
Gallery Route One, Pt. Reyes Station, CA, 1993  
"Sea Fever," Transamerica Pyramid, 1993  
"Cats," Bolinas Museum, 1993  
"With New Eyes," San Francisco State University, 1995  
"As Seen At The Beach," Bolinas Museum, 1997  
"Miniature Show," Bolinas Museum, 1997