

# RYAN LEE

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NEW YORK NY 10001  
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## HYPERALLERGIC

### How Asian-American Artists Made a Mark on Abstract Expressionism

Danielle Wu  
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George Miyasaki, "Green Landscape" (1957); Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 × 46 5/8 inches, Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Julie Miyasaki, 2014.

HONOLULU, HI — The vast region traditionally referred to in the West as “the East,” which includes countries like Japan and China, has a long history as a source of fascination for Western artists, from James Whistler to John Cage. Looking East for inspiration becomes an insidious form of Orientalism when the practice results in denigration or in the sense of an exclusive claim to cultural superiority for the West. Such is the subject of *Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West* at the Honolulu Museum of Art. Curated by Theresa Papanikolas, the exhibition offers a critical examination of mid-20th-century American abstraction and its East Asian influences, including East Asian and Pacific Islander practitioners that are often left out of the established Western canon.

Ruth Asawa, one of the few Asian women associated with AbEx, is given a sensational central role in the exhibition. Her sculpture “Untitled (S. 540, Hanging, Seven-Lobed, Interlocking

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Continuous Form within a Form)" (c. 1958), with its translucent undulating curves achieved through entwined wire, evokes a feminine figure when placed across from Willem de Kooning's female muse "Woman as Landscape" (1954–5). Although critics often highlight Black Mountain College as a critical moment in Asawa's artistic development, her placement in this exhibition, adjacent to other Japanese artists, compares her aesthetic sensibility to other Japanese-American contemporaries. For example, Asawa is placed in conversation with Hawai'ian-born Japanese-American artist Toshiko Takaezu's voluptuous stoneware, which is glazed with a dynamic velocity similar to the paint strokes of Jackson Pollock or Robert Motherwell. Like many Abstract Expressionists, Takaezu studied Zen Buddhism and visited Japan to learn from traditional Japanese potters and ceramicists. Meanwhile, Tadashi Sato's paintings also feature overlapping, effervescent ovoids that evoke the clear water of his homeland, Hawai'i.

The low visibility of Asian abstractionists until recently is due to the discrimination they faced during a moment when the craze for Asian concepts and aesthetics ironically crescendoed in the United States. Anti-Japanese sentiment rose during World War II, when Japanese-Americans such as Asawa and her family were ordered into internment camps between 1942–46. Not long afterward, from 1949 to 1955, a group of predominantly white male artists in New York called The Club met several nights a week at a community space on Eighth Street to discuss important concepts such as Zen. Artists, including Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Philip Guston, and John Cage, took a liking to the many lectures on Zen's principles: its embrace of emptiness, chance, and oneness with nature. It was not until 1988 that the United States offered a formal apology and reparations for interned Japanese-Americans through the Civil Liberties Act.

Franz Kline's "Corinthian II" (1961) features grandiose black brushstrokes on white background, with obvious visual affinity to Morita Shirū's graphic lacquered folding screen "Dragon Knows Dragon (Ryu wa ryū o shiru)" (1964). Their quick yet decisive brushwork arouses the sensuousness of blank surfaces and marking upon them. The large scale at which they work allows us to marvel at the visibility of the artist's hand, where micro becomes micro: breaks where bristles do not quite touch, or small splatters of ink that signify the ferocity at which they leapt. In fact, both Kline and Shirū entered into correspondence in the 1950s to share their love for Japanese calligraphy. Klein also wrote directly to another featured artist, Saburo Hasegawa, about his love for older painters of Japan and China.

Art critic Clement Greenberg opposed the perceptible link between Abstract Expressionism and Asian discourse, writing in 1955 that, "[N]ot one of the original 'abstract expressionists' — least of all Kline — has felt more than a cursory interest in Oriental art. The sources of their art lie entirely in the West." Not only was this xenophobic statement untrue, it also served to erase Asian-American Abstract Expressionist artists who were drawing from their own cultural roots while relegating them to be perpetual foreigners in the United States.

While some have claimed that Philip Guston's paintings reinvent the sublime, the fact that he drew upon Zen and Chinese painting's dissolution of form into nothingness often goes uncredited. On view together are Guston's "Ceremony" (1957) and George Miyasaki's "Green Landscape." Made the same year, both feature ghostly shapes of sea foam green and dusty red swim against each other as if lost in fog. While Mark Rothko is revered for his studies of vibrant

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color as a locus for meditative contemplation, this was also explored by artists such as Tseng Yu-ho, Isami Doi, and Bumpei Akaji.

The presentation of these parallel histories broadens current understandings of Abstract Expressionism beyond its well-celebrated New York-based artists. Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West is a long overdue expansion upon well-founded perceptions of American abstraction. Perhaps, though Clement Greenberg was incorrect in denying any “Oriental” influence in Abstract Expressionism, his suggestion that it was a uniquely American movement still holds. The critic’s nationalistic desire for an aesthetic attributed to the United States must simply accept that non-white cultural production can be authentically American too. As we continue to unravel the ancient empires built upon small boys clubs, I yearn for even more narratives beyond those that uphold white creativity as the historical measure of greatness and propositions that Asians or other minorities can also meet this bar.

Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West is on view through January 21 at the Honolulu Museum of Art (900 S Beretania St, Honolulu).

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## ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: LOOKING EAST FROM THE FAR WEST

Bansie Vasavani

January 9, 2018



GEORGE MIYASAKI, *Green Landscape*, 1957, oil on canvas, 92.7 × 118.4 cm. Courtesy the Estate of George Miyasaki and Honolulu Museum of Art.

Tucked away at the Honolulu Museum of Art (HoMA) in Hawai'i, a new revisionist discourse on Abstract Expressionism is brewing. Art critic Clement Greenberg's revered beliefs from the 1950s, which heralded the post-war modernists from the New York School for their Eurocentric proclivity, are being reexamined. In the quietly understated but powerful exhibition "Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West," curated by HoMA deputy director of art and programs Theresa Papanikolas, the long disregarded influence of Zen Buddhism and calligraphy on the Abstract Expressionists was reinstated.

Culled from the museum's own collection, with borrowed works from collectors and other institutions, the exhibition comprised of 49 paintings, drawings and sculptures, showcasing

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works by major American artists—such as Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock—alongside their Asian compatriots like Saburo Hasegawa, Isami Doi and Tadashi Sato. Many of these ethnically Asian artists grew up in Hawai‘i, but studied, lived and exhibited in New York during the 1950s and ‘60s. This relatively unexamined aspect of their practice leaves open the possibility of a dialogue about the impact of Asian traditions on Western art movements, as well as the connections between these artists’ individual modes of expression.

In the catalog essay for the exhibition, Papanikolas methodically formulates the alliance between Western abstraction and Eastern practices. Contrary to Greenberg’s emphasis on the significance of European modernism and dismissal of any Asian influence on the American abstractionists, early correspondence between Hasegawa and Franz Kline establishes their mutual interest in each other’s artistic pursuits. While Kline openly expressed the incorporation of calligraphy in his work and shared these ancient styles with his colleagues, Hasegawa was taken by the free-flowing forms of Western abstraction and introduced works by Kline, Motherwell and other abstractionists to artists in Japan. More importantly, we learn about Hasegawa’s lectures on the plausibility of Western abstraction to refresh Japanese calligraphy that were delivered at The Club—a gathering place for artists founded in New York by Philip Guston. It is at this watering hole on the Lower East side, frequented by many master painters from the New York School, including Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Adolph Gottlieb, where Zen Buddhism found its post-war appeal in North America. The artists were drawn to the Zen principles of self-discovery and focus on pure experience as an alternative to Western reliance on reason and objectivity.

In this context, Papanikolas deftly juxtaposed paintings by a group of artists whose methodology and interest in experiential subjectivity was inspired by Zen Buddhism, and the Japanese-Americans whose heritage propelled them toward seeking the sublime. The power of the exhibition lay in the way various works were grouped together in separate alcoves yet coalesced to tell a cohesive tale. In the front anteroom, for instance, Philip Guston’s early painting *Ceremony* (1957)—consisting of thick, buoyant, blob-like shapes in red, green, blue, pink and white paint that offer a festive spectacle—correspond with George Miyasaki’s flowing brushstrokes in *Green Landscape*, which was painted in the same year. Although Miyasaki’s similar choice of colors is more subdued, and the Hawai‘ian-born artist moved to California to develop his career, the same sense of spontaneity that achieves aesthetically appealing abstract forms is apparent in both paintings.

For many of the artists, calligraphic structures released from their traditional Japanese applications took on experimental forms. Hasegawa’s *Abstract Calligraphy* (1955–57), a black-and-white ink painting, combined shapes of Japanese calligraphy with the ease of action painting that can also be seen in Motherwell’s large black-and-white untitled canvas from 1963 that captures intense emotion. Although Motherwell was instrumental in introducing automatic drawing and European Surrealism to his compatriots in the 1940s, he became inspired by the spiritual tenets of Zen in the 1960s. The underlying Buddhist ideology of portraying the essence of one’s feelings can be traced through the bold uncontrived black curve that appears to rise freely in the air, pitted against the void of a blank canvas.

Only steps away from Hasegawa and Motherwell’s works, Hawai‘ian-born Satoru Abe’s welded copper and bronze sculpture, *The Idol* (1958), which was made during the artist’s stay in New

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York in the 50s, reveals a raw skeletal form that speaks to the archetypal images depicted by Robert Gottlieb, and relates to the instinctively drawn, abstracted nude figure in David Smith's *Untitled (Green Linear Nude)* (c. 1964), which was displayed nearby.

Throughout the exhibition, striking affiliations were evident between the Western abstractionists and the Asian artists who were their contemporaries in New York, though the latter were unacknowledged by art institutions for their contributions and were segregated by virtue of their ethnic origins. Los Angeles-born Isamu Noguchi is a case in point: the intersecting lines in his abstract bronze sculpture *Victim* (1962) strike an immediate connection with Franz Kline's broad forceful strokes in *Corinthian II* (1961). Although Kline's interest in calligraphy is known, Noguchi's evocation of natural forms through his mastery of sleek, experimental techniques developed under the tutelage of Constantin Brancusi was sidelined. The uniqueness of Noguchi's language is echoed in the works of other neglected artists, like Tadashi Sato, whose translucent oil paintings reveal an uncanny tie with nature, much like Sam Francis's painting *Black and Red* (1950–53), its blotches resembling a field of petals. In HoMA's exhibition, it was amply perceptible that all of the artists whose work was on show—whether it was Ad Reinhardt, Richard Pousette-Dart, Isami Doi, Kenzo Okada or others—exhibited the Zen attitude of deep introspection that related to larger existential questions explored by post-war artists in the West.

Even without the large iconic works by Rothko, Newman and Pollock that one is used to seeing, this low-budget and somewhat modest exhibition made a strident claim to reposition a narrative that favored European influences and decidedly excluded everyone except a handful of male American artists based in New York. But if there's any criticism one can offer, it is that the poor lighting in the galleries does much disservice to making the path shine on an otherwise untold story.

"Abstract Expressionism: Looking East from the Far West" is on view at the Honolulu Museum of Art until January 21, 2018.