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Creating an art installation of family memories of displacement and forced migration

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This photo-essay presents the creation of the artworks for the installation *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* about my Japanese family's displacement and forced migration during WWII, as a series of activities in which memories, reflections, emotions, images, desires for healing and connecting with others, and beauty emerged and interacted in the context of the Covid pandemic. The creative process was multidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

The author

Lydia Nakashima Degarrod is an exhibiting visual artist and cultural anthropologist (Ph.D. University of California, Los Angeles). She has exhibited in numerous galleries and museums in the United States and Latin America and received international awards for her work. She has conducted research on Chilean exiles, Japanese migrants in Latin America, and dream narratives and beliefs among the indigenous Mapuche of Chile and among US residents. She teaches at the California College of Arts and serves as co-Chair of the Centre for Aesthetics and Politics.

Keywords: Artmaking, Forced Migration, Japanese Latin American, Fiber Art, Healing.

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Introduction

This photo-essay presents the creation of the artworks for the installation *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* about my Japanese family's displacement and forced migration during WWII as a series of activities during which memories, reflections, emotions, images, desires for healing and connecting with others, and beauty emerged and interacted with each other in the context of the Covid pandemic. The creative process was not unidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

Artmaking requires access to the imagination for the creation of ideas (Moss, 2024) as well as technique, experience and a deep engagement with the materials. In this photo-essay I present a series of performative acts that allowed me to engage with my imagination and emotions. Among them the selection of fibers and techniques used for manufacturing and stitching the handmade papers, the selection of images to evoke specific historic and personal moments, and the engagement and connection with the material used. The effects of the isolation imposed by the Covid pandemic and a desire for healing were heightened in most of these activities. The creative process was not unidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

This project is part of a series of ethnographic art projects during which I conducted research on Japanese migration to Latin America. *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* is the most personal. It focuses on the forced migrations of my Japanese family in Latin America. Originally it had a different scope as it addressed the forced deportation of Japanese Peruvians from Peru to internment camps in the US during WWII, but the closing of borders of Peru and Chile during the Covid pandemic forced me to alter the project.

As an exhibiting visual artist and trained cultural anthropologist, I have written about the numerous interdisciplinary projects I have created in which I combined artmaking and ethnographic work. Among them I have addressed the role of artmaking in the creation of ethnographic knowledge (Degarrod, 2021, 2016a), the development of empathy in collaborative artmaking (Degarrod, 2016b), and art exhibitions as a form of public ethnography (Degarrod, 2013). In writing these interdisciplinary projects I wrote from the position of an ethnographer examining her artmaking and its impact on the ethnographic work. This photo essay diverts from my past writings in that it focuses on the artistic creation, and it is written primarily from my perspective as a visual artist.

Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls consisted of 75 flowers, made of handmade paper constructed out of mulberry and *yerba buena* fibers. In each flower petal I printed images that refer to memories of my family of WWII events that altered their lives by destroying their homes and forcing their migration to countries where they had difficulties in establishing a home and a sense of belonging. These flowers, a tribute to my Japanese family, hang from simulate barbed wire stems from the ceiling in a space of 10x15x10 feet. A major portion of the work was done during my tenure as Artist in Residence at the Kala Institute (March 2021-July 2021) in Berkeley, California. *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* has been exhibited at the Monterey Museum of Art, California (9/9/2021-1/1/2022), Burlington Art Center, Vermont (February 9-May 9 2024) and Edge on Square, San Francisco, California (June 29-February 2025).

In this photo essay, I follow the creation of the installation from the conception of its design to the creation of the art objects to its the final display.

The order of the photo-essay is as follows. Section 1 describes the use of my imagination in engaging in conversations with my deceased parents to find the design for the installation. Sections 2, 3 and 4 describe how the choices of fibers, and the use of specific techniques in the making of paper allows for moments of symbolically healing the past and reflecting on issues of identity, as well as connecting with the outside world. Section 5 explains the use of specific stitching techniques for imagining forms of connecting and soothing emotional wounds from the past. Section 6 shows the creation of a flower associated with the bombing of Hiroshima, and section 7 shows flowers associated with the incarceration of Japanese Peruvians in camps in the US. The last section shows images of the installation.

The Covid pandemic was an important component in the creation of these artworks. The feeling for healing expressed in the creation of the artworks was heightened by the context of illness and death, as well as the desire to connect with the world and was influenced by the social isolation created by the shelter in place order.

1.Designing the installation: My family as an imaginary audience

The design of the installation was inspired by my desire to pay a tribute to my family's wondrous journeys from Japan to Latin America. I came up with the idea of flowers as I engaged in an imaginary dialogue with my deceased parents. I asked myself: What would they like? How would they react if they came to see the exhibit? As an artist, I was engaged in the type of self-scrutiny that informs decisions about new work. The artist is normally engaged directly or figuratively with an artist community who plays a role in judging one's work and gives some kind of guidance, but in this case, it was primarily my deceased family who inspired the artworks. I felt that flowers would be accepted by all of them. I designed an installation formed by flowers in which each flower would be a vessel to carry the fragments of family memories.



Figure 1 My family. Artwork and photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

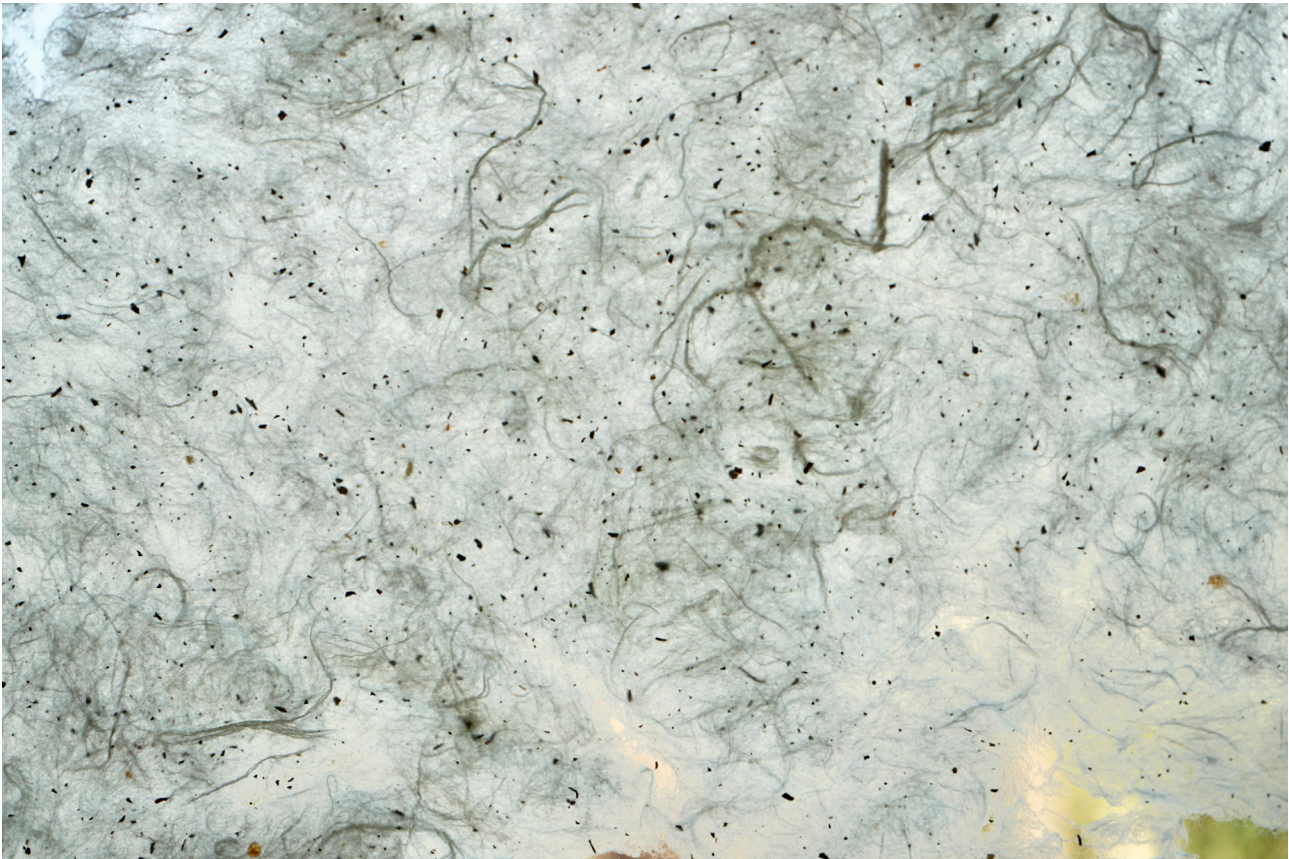


Figure 2 Pulp of Mulberry fiber and yerba buena. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

2.Crafting the Papers: Weaving memories and emotions

I selected two types of fiber to make the papers: mulberry, a fiber used to make *washi*, a Japanese paper, and *yerba buena*, an herb used in Latin America to soothe physical pain. I have used this fiber mix previously to express a symbolic healing of the suffering I observed among other *nikei* (people of Japanese descent) who became settlers in Latin America. As I cooked the bark of mulberry with the *yerba buena*, I listened to the news on the radio. The journalist described the rows of ambulances with dead bodies parked in front of hospitals in New York city. I ground the cooked fibers and herbs in a blender making a loud noise that I feared the blender would break. As I poured the mixture of fibers on a vat of water. I saw the slender fibers dancing in the water.

I thought of my deceased father, and I imagined him asking me why I was adding *yerba buena* to make the papers. Why don't you make a pure *washi* paper, just with mulberry? Why are you soiling the paper? Each time I imagined myself responding to my dad: "I want to heal our wounds, dad!" I looked at the stack of sheets of papers, and although wasn't white like *washi*, but something different, something that had speckles of yellow and brown throughout the surface.

I recalled my father's feelings of alienation living in Chile, a country where there were few Asians, and a country that he couldn't understand, a country to which he was forced to escape the deportation of Japanese Peruvians during WWII, and his feelings of disappointment about how the war had derailed his plans of going to Japan to study. I thought about my own conflicted identity as a Japanese Chilean, somebody of mixed heritage and ancestry. I thought that because of my Asian appearance, nobody saw my Latin American self and this forced me to try to be simply an Asian. I felt that by integrating the

yerba buena, I was acknowledging the hidden part of myself and at the same time healing my family's feelings of displacement. Every time those questions came to me, I dipped my fingers in the vat of water, and I felt the herbs uniting and creating something different.



Figure 3 Handmade papers. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

3. Using Japanese style of papermaking: Connecting with the outside world

I chose the Japanese method of creating the papers, although is harder than the Western style, to honor my Japanese ancestors. This method requires that one holds the bamboo screen and a wooden frame with two hands and dips into the water with the pulp several times until the screen has been covered with an even layer of pulp. I engaged in this series of precise movements each filling the screen with layers of pulp. First, I dipped the screen with the frame in the vat of water where the crushed fibers floated in, and quickly I scooped the pulp on the screen in precise movements and watched how each movement lined up a layer of pulp on the screen until it looked like a solid sheet. Next, I lifted the screen with the pulp feeling the pull of the water as if the vat was resisting the creation of the paper. Each time the movement became better. I piled the sheets of pulp on a table separated by a sheet of felt. It was a rhythmic activity which made me feel as if I was in tune with and in unison with the outside world. I was no longer separated from the world while I was sheltering in place because of the pandemic.

4. Creating the flowers



Figure 4 Image Transfer on handmade paper of Japanese Peruvians deported from Peru to camps in the US. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

5. Printing Memories, Stitching Emotions and Feelings of Healing

Using the paper lithograph method I printed on the handmade papers images from photos associated with my family memories of forced migration. I selected photos from different sources to convey the presence of Japanese migrants in Latin America, the bombing of Hiroshima, the neighborhood where Japanese Peruvians lived, the deportation of Japanese Peruvians, and maps and photos of the Crystal City camp where most of the Peruvian Japanese were incarcerated during WWII.

I created several flowers associated with my father's experience in Peru and the deportation of Peruvian Japanese to the US. Each of the petals of the flowers told fragments of memories.

I selected a photo of the neighborhood in Lima where my father grew up in one of the largest and oldest communities of Japanese people living in Latin America. I transferred the image using dark blue etching ink on a piece of handmade paper. I cut the paper in a petal form, and I embroidered it using red French knots to denote the feelings of hate that Japanese people must have felt in Lima in the months before their deportation to the United States when mobs of people attacked their neighborhoods and set up their buildings on fire. Piercing the paper with the needle to create the knots, I felt that in the physical act of puncturing the paper I created a rhythm that matched with my heart beats as I imagined these people's fear. I felt much sadness for my father. I imagined him before the war, young and carefree walking on those streets



Figure 5 Image transfer of my father's neighborhood in Lima on a sheet of handmade paper. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

not knowing how his life would change so dramatically. I felt a desire to create a physical link with those memories. Using Sachiko, the Japanese method of stitching and mending torn clothing, I stitched the sidewalks creating a blue carpet made by the short stitch lines. I created a surface where I imagined my father would walk freely on in the street.



Figure 6 Petal of one flower with image transfer of my father's neighborhood in Lima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 7 Flower showing my father's neighborhood in Lima and the deportation of Japanese Peruvians. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarro, 2021



Figure 8 Flower in installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 9 Flower showing the bombing of Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

6. Bombing of Hiroshima

On August 6, 1945, at 8:14 am, an atomic bomb dropped by the US exploded over Hiroshima killing over 8,000 people. Among those killed were members of my Japanese family. For my parents, it was a devastating event that radically altered their lives. My parents, whose ancestral homes were in the city of Hiroshima, had been waiting for the end of the war so they could return to Japan and reunite with their families in Hiroshima and pursue their different dreams. Instead, their lives as sojourners ended dramatically that day, my father in Peru, and my mother in Chile, both realized that their stay in Latin America would be permanent.

The creation of several flowers addressing this event led to my recalling and addressing many aspects of my own upbringing in Chile and the difficulties that my parents had in living in a country so different than from Japan.

I used red to depict the burning and violence of the bombing and war, and black and white for the ashes.



Figure 10 Petal showing the last building standing after the bombing of Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

I selected images that directly referred to the actual bombing and its effect on the city: pictures of the explosion created by the bomb, the building in Hiroshima which miraculously survived the bombing, and the map of the trajectories of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The act of stitching, using French knots and Sashiko, marked a desire to dialogue with the past.



Figure 11 Petal showing the explosion of the bomb in Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

7. The Incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII

I dedicated several flowers to portray the incarceration of people of Japanese descent during WWII using photos of the different camps as well as maps with the layout of the buildings. As with the rest of the flowers the stitching provided a venue in which to express the different emotions I felt during the creation of these flowers.



Figure 12 Flowers depicting internment camps. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 13 Petal depicting an internment camp. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 13 Flower depicting an internment camp. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

8.The Installation

75 flowers were attached to barbed wire- like stems hanging from the ceiling had been installed in different gallery spaces. While each installation has been different due to the uniqueness of each space, lighting, and the displaying of the installation by the gallery staff, all of them allowed the viewers to immerse in the space and engage in the multiplicity of the fragments of memories and create stories of them.



Figure 14 Flowers depicting cotton plantations. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 15 Detail Installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 16 Installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 17 An spectator viewing the installation. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

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