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Contact Zones and Liminal Spaces in Okinawan and Zainichi Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This article focuses on selected art works by third-generation Zainichi Koreans Haji Oh and Soni Kum, and Okinawan-based Chikako Yamashiro to explore ways in which these artists have continued to develop innovative, interdisciplinary practices to explore contact zones and liminal spaces in the East Asian context. Drawing on Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's notion of minor transnationalism, it argues the creative interventions of the three artists shed light on complex histories of minor transnationalism and at the same time alert us to ways in which the legacies of colonialism, migration and war continue to evolve in the present in Okinawa, Jeju Island, and Japan. Deploying different media, practices and techniques, all three artists aim to deterritorialize dominant visual and historical narratives and draw inspiration from minor literatures in ways that disrupt binary and vertical relationships, making visible minor to minor connections and ways of envisioning horizontal networks.

Keywords

minor transnationalism – contemporary art in Japan – Zainichi Koreans – Okinawa – postcolonial studies – Haji Oh – Soni Kum – Chikako Yamashiro

In a previous issue of this journal, contemporary Asian American artists exploring “Islands and Oceanic Imaginaries” were examined by Margo Machida and others, bringing attention to innovative works that shed light on ways in which “islands, island chains, archipelagos, and oceanic passages are conceived both as metaphors for human experience and as real sites where pressing social, political, and economic concerns of local and global magnitude can

be interrogated.”¹ My article in that issue discussed three artists based in Japan at the time – third-generation Zainichi Korean artists Haji Oh and Soni Kum, and Okinawan-based Chikako Yamashiro – who work in a range of media as they explore themes of transborder migration and the experiences of diasporic subjects in the contexts of Japan and East Asia more generally. I cited work of cultural theorist Satoshi Ukai who asked, “How is it possible for an island to become something other than *a dot* on the strategic map of a global military superpower?”² and argued that the textile art, performances, and video installations by Oh, Kum, and Yamashiro not only touch upon entangled histories that continue to impact regional relations, but also contribute to the envisioning of links and intersections among islands and other “peripheral” territories that are relevant in the discussion of Trans-Pacific studies, and Asian diasporas in the Americas. Their works then, and now, resonate with many of the works Machida discussed and continue to “visualize multi-sited points of attachment and even fluid Asian diasporic positions that elude territorially determined national boundaries.”³

As the editors of the current issue have noted, important work in the field of Trans-Pacific studies,⁴ and the work of the cultural theorists Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih are also helping create new frameworks for the consideration of work by artists such as Oh, Kum, and Yamashiro.⁵ This article takes up the questions raised by Machida and Ukai, and again asks how a transnational perspective and the notion of “minor transnationalism” might be useful in approaching new works and projects by these artists. In their discussion of minor transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih note, “what is lacking in the binary model of above-and-below, the utopic and dystopic, the global and the local, is an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of

1 Margo Machida, “Pacific Itineraries: Islands and Oceanic Imaginaries in Contemporary Asian American Art,” *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 3, no. 1–2 (2017): 9–34.

2 Satoshi Ukai, “*Shima, rettō, hantō, tairiku: Tonari au monotachi no wakuseiteki shikō* (Islands, Archipelagos, Peninsulas, Continents: A Planetary View of Those Living Alongside One Another),” in *Shuken no kanata de* (Beyond sovereignty) by Satoshi Ukai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2008), 165–6.

3 Machida, “Pacific Itineraries,” 13.

4 See, for example, Janet Alison Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen eds., *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014); and Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2012).

5 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. by Françoise Lionnet and Shi-mei Shih (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–23.

minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries.”⁶ I argue that these three artists continue to find ways through their respective artistic practices to “unravel,” “destabilize,” and “complicate” dominant nation-centred narratives, and to develop what Hiroki Yamamoto calls “post-imperial techniques” as they delve into the legacies of colonialism in East Asia.⁷

Metaphors and images of borders and migrations and the ongoing impact of military presence in Okinawa and Jeju Island feature prominently in many of their works. Oh uses the materials and techniques of textile art, Kum and Yamashiro, montage and superimposition, to create radical viewpoints and a “sensory perception of liminal spaces and contact zones, where marginalization is not explored through vertical or centre-periphery articulation of Majority vs. Minority, but rather, through horizontal relationships between Minorities.”⁸ Based primarily on interviews and written statements by the artists,⁹ this article examines Oh’s installation *Grandmother Island Project* (2017), Kum’s new collaborative project with Korean migrants, and Yamashiro’s recent video works *Mud Man* (2016) and *Chinbin Western* (2019).

1 Unravelling History: Haji Oh’s *Grandmother Island Project*

In *Grandmother Island Project* (fig. 1), Haji Oh continues to explore the connections between her family history and the migration of Koreans from Jeju Island to Osaka during the period of Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945). She also introduces images associated with other histories of migration to islands in the Pacific near Australia. Characteristically, Oh has found ways to integrate the themes and metaphors embedded in the work with the actual materials and techniques of textile art, as the title of the exhibition in which this work was shown, *Te ni takusu, ito e takusu* (*Memories in Weaving*), suggests.

6 Lionnet and Shih, “Introduction,” 7.

7 Hiroki Yamamoto, “*Datsu teikoku no gihō—higashi ajia gendai bijutsu to shokuminchi no isan*,” in *Gendai bijutsushi—Ōbei, nihon, toranzunashionaru* (Tokyo: Chuko Shinsho, 2019), 247–82.

8 Gayle Sato, unpublished invited commentary, “Trans-Pacific Japanese Diaspora Art: Encounters and Envisions of Minor-Transnationalism,” symposium, Kyoto University Zinbunken Academy, Tokyo, 8 December 2018.

9 In addition to multiple email exchanges, I conducted oral interviews with the artist in June 2017 at Wollongong University, NSW, Australia. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the artist, her biography and practice, as well as statements, are from the artist’s website or these communications.

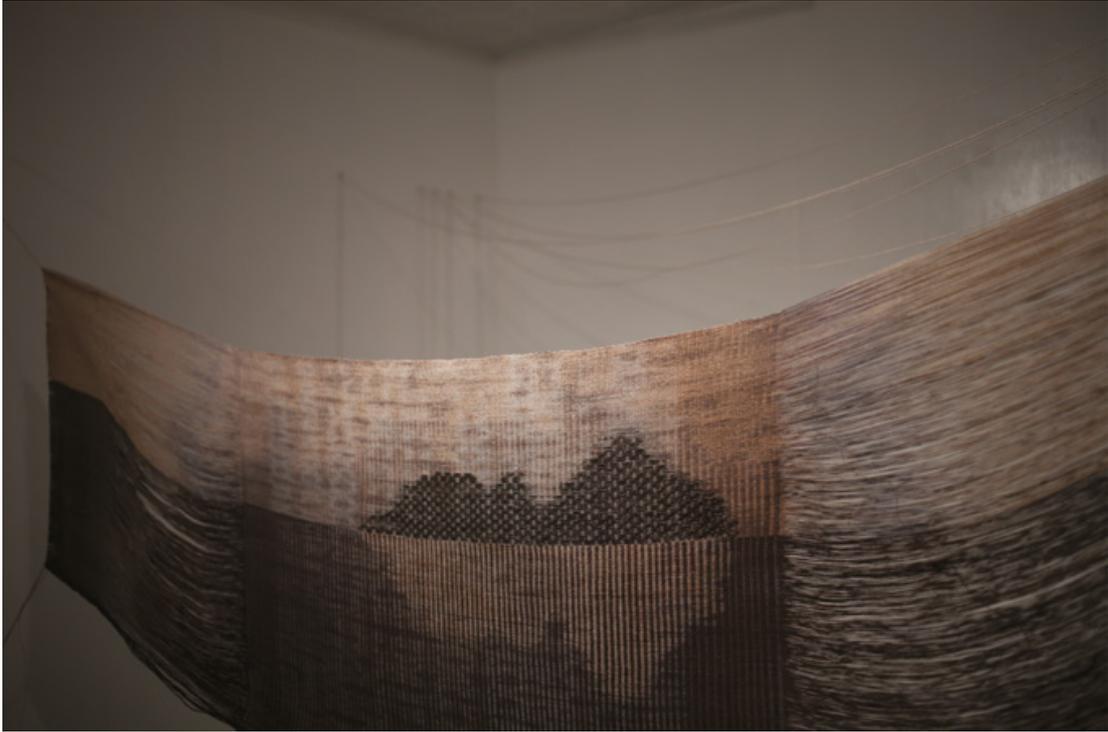


FIGURE 1 Haji Oh, *Textile as Map T.I.* (detail), from *Nautical Map, Grandmother's Island Project*, 2017, linen, dimensions variable.

IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

For the *Grandmother Island Project*, she used fibre, hand-spun thread, and woven and dyed textiles, along with weaving techniques that help achieve her aim to reveal “the interconnectedness between untold stories.” The artist had found a way to run a continuous warp thread through the entire piece using a traditional Guatemalan technique and backstrap loom, developing a technique whereby she could create an image of an island with the warp and weft threads interwoven in a way that symbolizes the continuity of memory and time, making her woven works “an embodiment of space, time and memory.”

Oh’s primary goal is to use the metaphor and material of textiles to unravel official narratives of history. According to the artist, unravelling fabric serves as a metaphor for deconstructing texts: “feeling the texture of threads and weaving a textile resembles an act of recalling memory.”¹⁰ For Oh, Jeju Island is both an imaginary island, and one that continues to be a site of social and political tension in the region. As a young girl, hearing stories about Jeju Island from her mother and grandmother awakened her imagination, and she continues to

¹⁰ Haji Oh, *Oh Haji: Te ni takusu, ito he takusu (Haji Oh: Memories in Weaving)* (Oyama, Japan: Kurumaya Museum of Art, 2019), 56. “T.I.” in Oh’s *Textile as Map* (2017) stands for “Thursday Island.”

this day to spin memories and threads that she says “are becoming my skin.”¹¹ Through her works, Oh creates a new language woven in threads and fibres; the repetitive and time-consuming gestures of creating textile art are inseparable from the process of re-imagining narratives of history.

Now based in Australia, Oh returns to Japan regularly and has extended her body of work to include research on female divers, some of whom migrated from Jeju Island and worked along the coastlines and on remote islands in Japan, and whose stories resonate with the experiences of present-day migrant women from Asia. Their migration stories between Jeju and the southern islands of Kyushu in search of work, are suggestive of alternative narratives of contested island territories such as Takeshima/Dokdo, or, to use Lionnet and Shih’s phrase, “minor-to-minor” networks.¹²

2 Re-imagining ‘Contact Zones’ in Soni Kum’s *vegetation and Morning Dew*

The notion of minor transnationalism might also be understood in relation to Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones,” a term that has been used in the context of feminist theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial theory in reference to social spaces where cultures “meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”¹³ Through her video, performance, and film installation works, interdisciplinary artist Soni Kum has continued to raise new questions about the asymmetrical relations of power in past and present experiences of Zainichi Koreans. In her recent project, *Morning Dew* (2019–2020), for which she has been awarded the Kawamura Arts and Cultural Foundation Grant for Socially Engaged Art, Kum continues to use montage and the juxtaposition of past documentary and film footage with present-day oral narratives to explore these contact zones.

11 Haji Oh, exhibition wall text, *Haji Oh: Memories in Weaving*, Kurumaya Museum of Art, Oyama, Japan, 2019. English translation by the author.

12 Lionnet and Shih, “Introduction,” 7. Takeshima/Dokdo is a cluster of rocky islands in the “Japan Sea,” which is at the centre of a diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea. “Takeshima” (bamboo islands) is the Japanese name and “Dokdo” (solitary islands) is the Korean name. “Profile: Dokdo/Takeshima Islands,” BBC News, 10 August 2012; Haji Oh, *Haji Oh: Memories In Weaving*, 44.

13 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40.

Kum was born and raised in a Korean community in Tokyo. She attended North Korean schools through high school, and later entered a Japanese university in Tokyo; from 2002 to 2005 she studied film and video art in the MFA program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). In California, she was exposed to new forms of performance and video art, and discovered fresh directions for her own thinking and work through postcolonial, and critical studies of contemporary art. In a 2018 interview, she explains that at CalArts she encountered vibrant discussions about postcolonial theory, and learned about Trans-Pacific movements and dialogues among contemporary avant-garde artists such as Yoko Ono and Teiji Furuhashi of Kyoto-based artist collective Dumb Type.¹⁴

Inspired by these encounters, Kum began to develop her own interdisciplinary practice and experimented with live performance and a range of media in works such as *Story of Light* (2001), *Sheep* (2002), and *Red Hunting* (2004). In the video work *Beast of Me* (2005), created at Cal Arts for her MFA, Kum linked segments of film footage and a trilingual voice-over narration in English, Korean, and Japanese. In *Foreign Sky* (2005), also completed at Cal Arts, she created a montage of film fragments drawn from archival documentary and original film footage. Raising questions about the representation of gendered and racialized bodies, the work explores her own family's history, beginning with the imposition of Japan's colonial regime which led to her great-grandmother and grandmother's migration to Japan.¹⁵ Kum returned to Japan in 2005 and entered the doctoral program in fine art at Tokyo University of the Arts where she continued to experiment with performance and the juxtaposition of images and voices from existing film narratives, disrupting and opening up new ways of sensing and representing the gaps and silences in personal and "official" histories.

Kum's live performance work, *vegetation* (2009), was inspired by a novel written by Ki-Young Hyun published in Korea in 1978 about the 4.3 Massacre on Jeju Island.¹⁶ Open discussion of the 1948 Jeju uprising and massacre had

14 "Dialogue with Soni Kum," unpublished interview by Hiroki Yamamoto, November 2018, emailed to the author with the artist's permission, 4 January 2019.

15 For more information on Soni Kum's *Foreign Sky*, see Brett de Bary, "Looking at *Foreign Sky*: Desperately seeking post-Asia: Soni Kum, Nagisa Oshima, Ri Chin'u," *Asian Cinema* 6, no. 1 (2015): 7–22; Hiroki "Decolonial Possibilities of Transnationalism in Contemporary Zainichi Korean Art," *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 12, no. 1 (2019): 107–128.

16 On 3 April 1948, fearing the permanent division of the Peninsula, many Jeju Islanders rose up in a protest that was brutally suppressed. It is estimated that thirty thousand people—or 10 percent of the population—died, and that forty thousand fled to Japan.

long been suppressed, and Hyun's landmark novel, *Aunt Suni* (1978), marked a turning point with regard to the taboo subject.¹⁷ The novel was later translated from Korean to Japanese by Zainichi Korean poet and writer Shijong Gim, himself a survivor of the 4.3 massacre and who migrated to Japan in 1949. The links between the original novel, Gim's translation into Japanese, and Kum's adaptation of it as a live performance work might all be understood as examples of minor literature and minor transnationalism.

It was the image of rich harvests in a field of potatoes where the bodies of those who had died in the 4.3 massacre had been buried that inspired the installation *vegetation*. To paraphrase Kum, she was struck by the scenes in the novel, in which countless dead bodies were dumped into a potato field because there was no other place to put them; the following year, unusually large potatoes were harvested but the residents could not bring themselves to eat them, even though it was a time of severe food shortage.¹⁸

Since then, Kum has continued to research, deconstruct, and create montaged film narratives using images from documentary and fictional films. In February 2019, she screened one such work, *Kwangjoo is Impeaching* (2005) for the first time in Japan at a symposium on Art and Postcolonial East Asia in Tokyo (fig. 2). She has also interviewed North Korean migrants/defectors in South Korea, and ex-returnees who defected from North Korea to Japan. It was out of these projects that her work-in-progress, *Morning Dew* emerged.

The title for the new project makes reference to the artist's personal memory and experience of first learning the well-known song, "Morning Dew" (*Achim isui* in Korean and *Asa tsuyu* in Japanese) while in elementary school in Tokyo. Written by Min Gi Kim in 1970, the song was popular in South Korea in the early 70s and inspired many engaged in the pro-Democracy movement at the time. It was banned in South Korea in 1975, but later was taught in Korean schools in Japan. For Kum, the song symbolizes the regeneration of something "pure and beautiful," its powerful lyrics and music gave hope to listeners "going through a dark night of the soul."¹⁹ In Kum's *Morning Dew* project, the song is

17 At the time, the author was arrested, but the work was widely read, and helped open new spaces for dialogue, something that could be achieved more easily through literature and art than political discourse. See also Hoonjun Kim, "Seeking Truth after 50 Years: The National Committee for Investigation of Truth about the Jeju 4.3 Events," in *The International Journal of Transnational Justice* 3, no. 3, (November 2009): 406–423, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijp014>.

18 Soni Kum, "vegetation," Sonikum.com, artist's website, accessed 15 November 2019, http://www.sonikum.com/?page_id=235.

19 "Morning Dew' by Soni Kum won the grant!," Kawamura Arts and Cultural Foundation, News Report, 21 January, 2019, http://www.kacf.jp/pdf/vol2_en.pdf?fbclid=IwARozTxibQSDLda8_zYicLwwXdTZ8E4LyEryxPIImOOSTro5q4RDtM3Vgnlo. "Morning Dew"



FIGURE 2 Soni Kum, *Kwangjoo is Impeaching* (still), 2005, video, single-channel, 87 minutes. IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

used as a catalyst for dialogue and exchange with the interviewees, invoking a minor literature that links minor-to-minor narratives of memory and resistance to forms of oppression still relevant today.

Importantly, both Oh and Kum have worked with other Korean diaspora artists including Jane Jin Kaisen, a Korean adoptee whose works include *Dissident Translations* (2011) and *Communities of Parting* (2019). The dialogues and collaborations among these artists that have emerged over the last decade are themselves generating new networks of minor transnationalism. New forms of online curation and networking are also helping to build these minor-to-minor networks in which practicing artists and scholars of the diaspora exchange information and ideas.²⁰

was one of the only South Korean songs children were allowed to sing in North Korean schools.

20 Crystal Mun-Hye Baik and Jane Jin Kaisen, "Introduction: Korea and Demilitarized Peace," *Periscope* [Social Text Online], posted 21 December 2018, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/11908-2; Haruki Eda, "Unmaking Borders to Demilitarize Peace: A Zainichi Korean Experience," *Periscope* [Social Text Online], posted 21 December 2018, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/unmaking-borders-to-demilitarize-peace-a-zainichi-korean-experience/.

3 “Who is Speaking?” Liminal Spaces in Chikako Yamashiro’s *Mud Man* and *Chinbin Western*

In her early video works, Chikako Yamashiro filmed live performances in graveyards and along visible and invisible borders in liminal spaces near US bases in Okinawa. Her works sometimes playfully but radically disrupt the notion of centre and periphery, such as in *Okinawa Tourist—Trip to Japan* (2004) where she is seen standing in front of the Diet Building in Tokyo holding up a photo of an Okinawan tortoise-shaped tomb, and calling out “Okinawa is NOT OK!!” a response to a campaign to reassure tourists in the wake of 9/11, that it was safe for them to travel to Okinawa. Yamashiro’s interest in borders and liminal spaces continues to be a central theme in her work.²¹ *Woman of the Butcher Shop*, a three-channel video installation first exhibited at the Mori Museum in Tokyo in 2012, combines film footage of an actual weekend flea-market located along the fence of a US military base in Okinawa, with fictional film segments in which several actors perform alongside the semi-documentary footage of the market. The precarious space of the market – like the shoreline in the earlier work, *Shore Connivance—Shore of Ibano, Urasoe City* (2007) – was situated on unregulated and tacitly approved agricultural land that could be reclaimed by the military at any time. In fact, since these works were created, the Urasoe shoreline has been reclaimed in a development project and Shirakawa Market was shut down for construction of the new Kadena Air Base.

Continuing along this powerful trajectory, Yamashiro produced *Mud Man* (written in kanji as “「土の人」”) in 2016, her second three-channel video and sound installation work which received the 2017 Asian Art Award and the Zonta Prize at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival in 2017. Again, Yamashiro makes use of images from scenes in earlier works of liminal underground limestone caves, the Shirakawa Market, and the Oura Bay near Henoko, but here she also takes viewers on a journey to Gangjeong Village, Jeju Island, where construction of a tri-lateral Naval Base has been completed. The title is translated from the characters for *tsuchi* or earth (土) and *hito* or person (人) and read as *tsuchi no hito* in Japanese. The installation incorporates new film and sound techniques the artist acquired over the years, as well as poems – examples of minor literature in Korean, Okinawan Dialect, and Japanese – and fragments of documentary film from the Battle of Okinawa, the Korean War, and the War in Vietnam. Projected on three screens in a non-linear, filmic sequence, the resulting montage suggests Okinawa and Jeju Island are linked as the images traverse time periods and geographical locations to create new meanings and associations

21 See Shinjō and Kondō “Open Wounds: What Chikako Yamashiro Portrays,” in *Yamashiro Chikakao*, ed., Naoko Fukunda (Tokyo: Yumiko Chiba Associates, 2012), 67–77.



FIGURE 3 Chikako Yamashiro, *Mud Man* (still), 2017, video, single-channel version, 25 minutes, 30 seconds. Produced in cooperation with 2016 Aichi Triennale.

© CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO. IMAGE COURTESY OF YUMIKO CHIBA ASSOCIATES.

(fig. 3). Art critic Masashi Kohara argues that the work makes connections between the US, Japan, and South Korea visible, and that Okinawa and Jeju Island “are like siblings, cursed with having great geo-political value as strategic locations for military bases.”²² While it is impossible to give more than a superficial account of this complex work in written form, it may be useful to look at some technical and narrative aspects of the work that makes apparent this horizontal “sibling” relationship.

On the wall outside of the darkened room where *Mud Man* was first exhibited at the Aichi Triennale in 2016, an excerpt from a poem by German-speaking Bohemian writer Franz Kafka reads: “And they have wings.” Available to visitors were copies of a handout with poems printed in three languages, emanating from the centre of the page to form a circular pattern. In the installation proper, images move in rapid succession on three screens – at times accompanied by sound, other times in silence. Lush fields of green and yellow crops growing in dark, red earth appear on the screen from an angle suggesting the view of a bird in flight—or a military drone. A man with mud-caked hands appears and looks up to a large bird’s nest high in a tree. A few seconds later, a longer shot of a field is followed by a hand and arm rising up from the grass, waving in the wind like a plant growing out of the earth. Other figures appear, their faces caked in yellow-grey earth.

22 Masashi Kohara, “Yamashiro Chikako’s Mud People,” in *Kyotographie International Photography Festival 2017*, ed., Sayaka Sameshina (Kyoto, Japan: Kyotographi, 2017), 36–37. Kohara notes the term “Mud Man” simultaneously refers to local residents engaged in sit-ins and refutes the highly derogatory term “dojin” (another reading of the same characters).

Audiences clearly hear the thudding sound of clumps of earth—or bird dung falling to the ground and on the people lying there. A man places a clump of the mud/dung to his ear, as if listening to a shell for the sound of sea waves. Others follow as we begin to hear the sound of poems in Korean, *Uchinaaguchi*, (the Irie Island dialect), and Japanese—that build into a rhythm—the words not quite decipherable. Yamashiro was inspired by poems that she imagined grew out of the seeds in the droppings of a large, mythical bird. Juxtaposed with images of the landscape and fragments of earlier video works are images of Jeju Island villagers and present-day peace activists protesting the construction of the naval base.

In another segment, several people watch with horror as short clips from documentary films of the Battle of Okinawa and the Vietnam War flip by in rapid succession against a background of sounds of artillery fire that fill the gallery (fig. 4). The soundtrack is actually a contemporary music score produced by three sound artists (beatbox artist ShOh, rapper Tokii, and DJ Shota)—who joined her in the collaboration. Sequences from the documentary films recording scenes of war are remixed and sampled into an alternative counter-narrative that links Okinawa to Jeju Island and transforms the sounds of artillery fire into contemporary music. Shots of tunnels and underground/undersea passages—some filmed at an abandoned US nuclear weapons storage facility in Iejima—simultaneously expose and deconstruct narratives of Cold War history and envision new connections between the islands.

The final segment is silent as the camera pans over a field of luscious white *teppō yuri* (coronet-shaped Easter lilies, cultivated today on Iejima) that sway



FIGURE 4 Chikako Yamashiro, *Mud Man* (still), 2017, video, single-channel version, 25 minutes, 30 seconds. Produced in cooperation with 2016 Aichi Triennale.
© CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO. IMAGE COURTESY OF YUMIKO CHIBA ASSOCIATES.

in the breeze, in and out of focus on the screen. The people have reappeared, lying in the field among the lilies. One by one, their hands and arms reach upward, like plants with flowers that are beginning to bloom, echoing the initial image in the film of a hand rising from the grass. As they reach toward the sky, the hands slowly begin to clap. The sound and rhythm build to a crescendo in a vibrant musical cadence that reverberates throughout the gallery space, leaving audiences with lasting experience of the work's resonance.

In the fall of 2019, Yamashiro's new single-channel work, *Chinbin Western: Representation of the Family* was exhibited at the National Art Center, Tokyo, in the group exhibition *Hanashiteiru no ha dare? Gendai bijutsu ni hisomu bungaku (Image Narratives: Literature in Japanese Contemporary Art)*. This video again draws on the linked trajectory of earlier works on Okinawa, and connects Jeju Island to Iejima, Iejima to Motobu Port, and in turn, back to Henoko where protest demonstrations continue to slow down land reclamation and the construction of a so-called "replacement facility" for US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Ginowan City.²³ Yamashiro's practice as an artist has often included references to present-day activism in Okinawa. As the construction near Henoko in Oura Bay carries on, protestors continue to oppose the destruction of the environment and military expansion.²⁴

Motobu Port, the site where *Chinbin Western* was filmed, is the port where tourists board the ferry to Iejima ("Ie Island"). The island is advertised in tourism flyers as an island of flowers and sunsets and tourists are invited to come and enjoy a range of recreational parks and tours. However, in 1945, Iejima was the site of a horrific frontline battle in the Battle of Okinawa and today it is still used as a firing and practice range for US military personnel.²⁵ At a quarry near the port, tons of sand and rock are excavated daily and transported by dump trucks and ferries to Camp Schwab US Marine Corps Base. The sand is being mixed into concrete and used to make thousands of concrete pilings that are being dropped into Oura Bay for land reclamation.²⁶ Protestors continue to sit or "lie-in" in front of the gate at Camp Schwabb or protest against the transport

23 "350 People Protest Futenma Replacement Facility as Camp Schwab Sit-ins Enter Sixth Year," *Ryukyu Shinpo*, 6 July 2019, <http://english.ryukyushimpo.jp/2019/07/17/30737/>.

24 The Ryukyu Archipelago (Okinawa) lies to the southeast of Japan's southern island of Kyushu. Jeju Island lies off the southern end of the Korean peninsula. The distance between Jeju and Okinawa is about 800 kilometres.

25 "Okinawa Protests Parachute Drill at Kadena Base as U.S. Denies Violating Deal with Japan," *Japan Times*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/30/national/okinawa-protests-parachute-training-at-kadena/#.Xjjz9mhKg2w>.

26 Ironically, marine biologists argue that the "soft seabed" in Oura Bay may delay construction. "Soft Seabed Puts U.S. Base Project in Okinawa Back in Tight Corner," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 4 May 2019, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201905040001.html>.

of the quarried sand and concrete in Motobu. *Chinbin Western* is a narrative of two families who live near the quarry—in one, the father is a driver of one of the trucks, and in the other, the daughter is an artist and caretaker of the local shrine. To earn a living, she also works in a bar in town.

Yamashiro describes the film as a “futuristic western” that plays on the narrative form of both Hollywood Western and Macaroni (Italian-style) Western films. The word *chinbin*, refers to a snack food familiar in Okinawa; the playful pun on Italian “Macaroni” or “Spaghetti Westerns,” alerts the viewer to the theatre of the absurd that awaits us behind the red velvet curtain that opens on a domestic drama in the new home of a young family living near the sand and gravel quarry. Irritated by headlines in the morning paper, the young husband begins to sing an operatic aria in Italian and the wife responds by reciting verses of poems in Okinawan dialect. Their children are watching this scene from the side of the room, hidden partly behind curtains. The husband’s job, presumably to help pay for their new house, is driving one of the dump trucks that hauls sand from the quarry to be shipped by barge around the northern tip of the island to Camp Schwab. In the next scene, he puts sunglasses on to hide his identity as he drives through lines of local protestors who are trying to prevent the movement of trucks hauling sand and gravel for the construction of the base at Henoko.

The second narrative focuses on a young painter who lives with her grandfather near the quarry and a sacred site where a heavenly boat thought to protect the villagers was once enshrined. At different points in the film, the two different narratives intersect, such as in the scene where the frustrated housewife looks out from her window at the artist who sometimes also joins the anti-base activists. In another scene, the artist, dressed as a cowgirl, dances with other women in the bar that the truck-driver father frequents (fig. 5).

In the final scene, the family of four again sits in their house in front of a window that looks out onto the desert-like landscape of the quarry (fig. 6). The curtain opens on a drama within the drama, staged on the dusty slag-heap of sand where the local shrine’s heavenly boat once was. The contemporary fable is interrupted with a scene from a drama suggestive of traditional Okinawan performing arts. A battle is ensuing between two village ancestors. After having left the village, unable to make a living there, the first elder has returned after many years and chastises the other for allowing the complete destruction of the shrine and the village. The latter responds, saying the only way to survive was to allow the destruction of the sacred site. As the battle continues, a priestess in white robes slowly climbs onto the barren mound of earth and makes gestures to restore order, at least for the moment.

Again, Yamashiro reveals an Okinawa not seen before, images that disrupt and contradict an expected image of the lush, tropical landscape in Okinawa.



FIGURE 5 Chikako Yamashiro, *Chinbin Western—Representation of the Family* (still), 2019, video, single-channel version, 32 minutes.
© CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO. IMAGE COURTESY OF YUMIKO CHIBA ASSOCIATES.



FIGURE 6 Chikako Yamashiro, *Chinbin Western—Representation of the Family* (still), 2019, video, single-channel version, 32 minutes.
© CHIKAKO YAMASHIRO. IMAGE COURTESY OF YUMIKO CHIBA ASSOCIATES.

This envisioning of Okinawa presses audiences to think about the violence inherent to the modern-day imperial and neo-colonial projects, ongoing military expansion, the climate crisis, and desertification. It also suggests that Okinawa is seen by some as a “frontier” in the “Wild, Wild West” of US military expansion, and that Indigenous resistance to that expansion is ongoing.

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Through the use of diverse forms of media and each with their own unique artistic practices, Haji Oh, Soni Kum and Chikako Yamashiro continue to present new ways of sensing and understanding experiences of migration, and present-day tensions in the East Asian and Trans-Pacific regions. Their works bring awareness to what Lionnet and Shih have called the “creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” and to richer, deeper, and more horizontal connections in the region; their respective practices as artists also help foster “the collective assemblage of enunciation,” and point to the possibility of future “transformation through active participation in the production of local knowledge and global cultures.”²⁷ As apparent from their recent projects, possibilities are already unfolding.

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²⁷ Lionnet and Shih, “Introduction,” 21.

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