

Reactions and Expressions through  
**ART and MEMORIALS:**  
Regarding World War 2  
and the Bombs Dropped in Japan

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ARTH 4919/4929 – Art & War Capstone  
Final Paper  
DUE: 05.06.2017  
EXTENSION: 05.10.2017

History class, at all ages, often feels like a class to remember the tragedies and downfalls of humankind. I know there is attention and focus on the good things, and the monumental things that made life better, but somehow it is hard to remember them. Is that a human tendency? Or is that a cultural tendency? This idea of mourning is one for the books. A topic so complex and involved that attempting to figure it out may drive you mad. Throughout the year, we have focused specifically on war. And because art touches a thousand different surfaces, we explored how people reacted to war, what art was created in memorium of war and the people involved, and how people then reacted to the art. It's a cycle that is exhausting, but truly so rewarding. In a culture, and arguably a global society where mourning is often frowned upon, studying how people cope and express their sorrow through different means, as well as share the stories they have in one to be aware of to have a general understanding of such a human part of life.

I was lucky enough to grow up in a household that taught me about intersection and different perspectives from the beginning. My father having roots in England, France, and Germany, and my mother being rooted evenly between Puerto Rico and Japan. Have such a strong cultural impact on my childhood exposed me to topics earlier than other kids. I grew up learning about Japanese culture. I learned about the more popular topics like the cultural honor and samurais, what good sushi tastes like and why the tea ceremony is important. Along with that, I grew up with a grandmother who lived through the event of the atomic bombs being dropped in her country. I grew up in America, learning about the wars we were involved in, and battles like Pearl Harbor. But I am thankful to have grown up knowing and learning about it from a non-American perspective as well.

As the end of the Art History course Art and War came closer, I really wanted to apply what critical thinking and analyzing skills I formed throughout this class, as we focused on the relationship between art and war and people, and apply it to a world I grew up knowing but never truly understanding, as I never had the tools to do so. I will be discussing the reaction and repercussions that my grandma personally experiences from the bombings, as well as how they effected my mom. I will explore the memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the parallels and differences between the two cities and how they handled the bombings, if any at all. I will also specifically hone in on the artist Miyako Ishiuchi, but mention briefly another including Krzysztof Wodiczko. I will be exploring the ways in which these reactions and responses to the war, and specifically to the bombings effected the rest of the citizens, as well as the world in general.

For contextual reasons, this is what happened and pushed the use of the nuclear weapons during World War 2. When Japan refused to surrender when requested (after events including Pearl Harbor), President Harry S. Truman, after being warned by some of his advisers that any attempt to invade Japan would result in massive amounts of American casualties, ordered that the atomic bomb be used to bring the war to an end. On August 6, 1945, the American bomber Enola Gay dropped a five-ton bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The first was dropped August 6, 1945, on Hiroshima, virtually leveling the city. A second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The death toll was about 140,000 in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki. About half the deaths in each city occurred on the day of the blasts; burns and radiation sickness claimed many more in the following

weeks and months. The Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were chosen because of their high military strategic value, were densely built up areas, and were close to other atomic bomb runs.

Beginning with the testimonial approach to the dropping of the bombs, I wanted to talk and interview my grandmother and my Mom. My grandmother, Etsukko, was only 15 years old when the bombs were dropped. She had lost her sister to tetanus earlier during the war and her brother died in the Pacific Theater during the war. When she was 30 she had married my grandfather, who was in the air force and based in Japan. Somewhat shortly after, they gave birth to my mother. On a personal perspective, there were many ways the bombs and the war effected my grandmother's day to day life. Some of the more interesting ways that the war effected my grandmother included how she won't eat brown rice now because that's all they had during the war, and it makes her feel sick. Another example is that when the foothills near my grandparents' house in Los Angeles, where they now live, caught on fire, she had a panic attack and was taken to the ER because it reminded her of the bombings.

My mother Naomi has a specific memory about visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial with my family, and my grandmother could not go in, as she said it would overwhelm her, without a doubt. My Mom said, when asked why she (my grandmother) wasn't going, said "Memorials do not help me, I'm glad they are there but they bring me pain. Remembering in painful." I found this extremely interesting as it immediately reflected to this idea of mourning, and how much the way people cope changes, especially

regarding culture. My Mom and I had a discussion about how honor based the Japanese culture is, and while there are many memorials for the tragedy of the bombs, it is not common practice to discuss the tragedies that happened, at least not in length. My Mom said it is very much a shame thing, and difficult for many to talk about as some have visual scars on their bodies of the tragedies and long effect of the war.

One of the most powerful examples of installation and testimonial art, is Krzysztof Wodiczko's piece called Hiroshima. The testimonial based piece is placed at the base of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, also known as the Atomic Bomb Dome. It is one of the few remaining structures left standing after the bombing on Hiroshima. The work is a recorded display of the hands of witnesses and survivors of the bombing, projected at the base of the structure, while the verbal testimony runs in the background. There is so much power in the use of hands instead of the classic headshot and interview approach for the testimony. Hands are symbolic for intimacy and identity in the way they move and reach out in relationship to one another. The power in the recording of the hands being projected at the bottom of the structure allows the ruins of this Atomic Bomb Dome to become a universal body for the witnesses and survivors of the bombing. There is a relevant element in the universal, combining, and recognizable, structure, and the unique and specific identity in the hands and the vocal part of the piece. It was put on display for the citizens that were able to come visit.

The last more generic testimonial aspect to the response to the bombings, were the articles and anniversaries of the event that are published and recorded. Previous President

Barack Obama went to Japan to meet with survivors on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombings, and met with survivors to hear their stories and experiences of the war and event. What I found so interesting about all of these articles that discuss the testimony's being heard and recorded is the lack of apology Japan has gotten from the United States still, 70 years later. In class, we discussed potential reasons for that lack of apology, and how the United States may not be in a space yet, still, to give it. Especially with current political events and other horrific wars and tragedies happening, it seems the pride we may have is still too big for the states to get over to give a much-deserved apology from our part.

The next major topic is that of memorials. The memorials created and made for this event in Japan are incredibly similar and parallel in their layout and names, and have a massive focus on peace, and almost serve as a grieving space, though the memorials themselves are grand, and "light" with water fountains and big community spaces. As previously mentioned, one of the more well-known structures is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, also known as the Atomic Bomb Dome. One of the few structures left standing after the blast. The ruins of the former Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall have been kept in the same state as immediately after the bombing. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage site. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is one of the most prominent features of the city. The park is extremely large, and covers more than 120,000 square meters. Before the bomb was dropped, the area was the political and commercial heart of the city, one of the reasons it was chosen as a target, and therefore a reason it was chosen to be the location of the peace park. The layout is open, light, and inviting. There is a water fountain, and plenty of space for a community gathering. The memorial park creates a space for visitors to sit in

the growth and peaceful takeaway of the tragedy. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum holds information and remains of the bomb, and the title fits cohesively with the previously mentioned memorials.

The city of Nagasaki has extremely similar memorials and spaces for witnesses and survivors to visit and spend time. The Nagasaki National Peace Memorial for Atomic Bomb Victims is similarly to the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima, in being representative and a form of remembrance for past life and the people that lost their lives in the horrific event. It was designed by architect Akira Kuryu, and was built between November 2000 and December 2002. When viewing from the outside, the top of the memorial consists mainly of a tree-lined basin of water through which the 12 pillars of light continue to rise from below. At night, 70,000 fiber optic lights are illuminated across the surface of the water, symbolizing the victims. Like the piece by Krzysztof Wodiczko, both cities have powerful and important ways of honoring those who died in the event of the bombs dropping. The Nagasaki Peace Park displays a statue at the center that is in a very thoughtful and specific position. The right hand is motioning upward toward the threat of nuclear weapons, while the left hand is motioning outward in a peaceful and inviting position. The legs are symbolic of thoughtfulness as well as boldness in beliefs on peace. Like Hiroshima, there is the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum for visitors to go and learn about the event and other logistical information and history.

Both Hiroshima and Nagasaki have ceremonies held each year to celebrate and mourn the lives of those who didn't survive the events of the atomic bombs dropping. I

found it incredibly interesting how strong and apparent the parallels between Hiroshima and Nagasaki are. The similar memorials and museums for the specific cities, but very much a unified and important approach to the coping, mourning, and memorium of the people who witness, survived, and passed away in the event, as well as the country as a whole and the scars it has because of the event.

The artist that stood out to me the most when researching artists that took a very “fine art” approach to their response to the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was Ishiuchi Miyako. She was born in 1947 in Gunma Prefecture, Japan, began her artistic career in the late 1970’s, and is now one of the country’s leading contemporary photographers.

(moa.ubc.ca) In an interview with Yuri Mitsuda, it states when introducing her that her “more recent work such as *Mother’s* (2000–2005), featured at the 2005 Venice Biennale; ひろしま / Hiroshima (2007); and *Frida* (2013), Ishiuchi turned to color, taking a forensic approach to examine clothing and objects laden with complex histories, underscoring the idea that the traces of time’s passage are her true subjects. “ (Aperture Foundation. Mitsuda, Yuri. Ishiuchi Miyako)

The two projects that I found the most relevant and intriguing in this discussion of reactions and responses through art to the Atomic Bombs was her personal photographs in a project she did involving her mom and her childhood in Japan. The second, and arguably the most stunning when speaking contextually is her series ひろしま / Hiroshima (2007). This piece, which was displayed at the University of British Columbia, is of distressed and clothes that were touched by that blast from the bomb. Ishiuchi placed the articles of



clothing on a light table to make them ghostly and transparent, giving them this lively shape to fill. The viewers is able to recognize every clothing items, shirts and pants and dresses, but they are “misplaced” and out of their comfort zone as they are soaked in blood in some cases, or ripped in half from the power of the blast. In the interview with Yuri Mitsuda, Ishiuchi made some incredibly profound comments on her series ひろしま / Hiroshima (2007):

“YM: Looking over ひろしま / Hiroshima, it seems that the images you chose have a certain transparency to them.

IM: Well, I shot for luminescence. All of them were shot in natural light. It’s almost seventy years after the war and yet there are still new things, preserved from that time, coming to light—isn’t that amazing? I go to visit and end up getting told, “We have some new pieces.” It’s shocking.

YM: They’re still alive. These personal effects.

IM: Exactly. People can’t bear having them any longer. They can’t bear them alone. So they bring them to the museum, make it so we all can bear them together. This kind of history is lost, usually.”

(Aperture Foundation. Mitsuda, Yuri. Ishiuchi Miyako)



(moa.ubc.ca)

In particular, this series of photographs struck a cord in me that moved me in a way I absolutely was not expecting to. The intimacy in the photographs of the clothes are too familiar, and too normal. As Ishiuchi stated in her interview with Yuri Mitsuda, these items are new and preserved, and are “still alive”. The specific work I think responds to the war in a profound and spiritual way, much like the installation piece involving the testimonies and the witnesses and survivors hands on Krzysztof Wodiczko’s piece, Hiroshima using the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. There is a sorrow and humbling tone to the photographs, as the viewers fights this inner contrast of feelings which call out emotions like familiar and heart break.

In her series with her mother, I found it an interesting point as we speak to what mourning looks like, and the way she mourned her mothers death, even after a rocky relationship. Ishiuchi participated in the Venice Biennial with the series, and shared with the Atlantic Edition that:

“Ishiuchi developed the series after her mother passed away five years ago. Though the two had never gotten along, Ishiuchi was grief stricken. "I couldn't throw away her things," she says. Instead, she photographed them, as a way to come to grips with her death--and life. The cosmetics and beautifully laced chemises reveal her mother as a fashion-conscious, sophisticated woman. Independent and strong, she worked as a truckdriver delivering military goods after her husband was drafted and then reported dead in the 1940s. She was pregnant by another man when her husband suddenly reappeared, very much alive. She paid to divorce her husband a week before giving birth to a daughter: Ishiuchi” (Itoi, Kay)

These two series dig deep into day to day life, and how applicable and relatable it is to viewers in Japan and out, witnesses of the atomic bombs being dropped or not, and just a woman dealing with her own grief and learning to mourn successfully.

In this paper, I discussed the reaction and repercussions that my grandma personally experienced from the bombings and the war, as well as how they effected my mom. I began to explore the memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the parallels the lack of differences between the two cities and how they handled the bombings.. I began to discuss the artist Miyako Ishiuchi, and briefly discussed Krzysztof Wodiczko. I wanted to begin to explore the ways in which these reactions and responses to the war, and specifically to the bombings, effected the rest of the citizens, as well as the world in general.

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