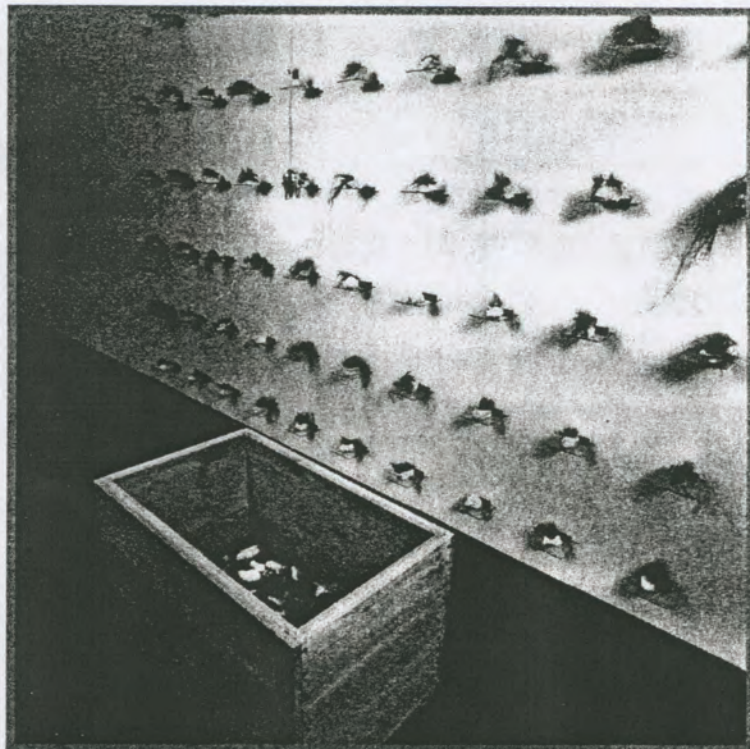


## Hawaii

### Lynne Yamamoto at The Contemporary Museum

**W**hen does the personal become political? When does the personal become emblematic? The recent work of Lynne Yamamoto negotiates these questions with delicate restraint. Yamamoto, born in Hawaii, now working in New York, draws on and works through the history of her maternal grandmother Chiyo, who came to Hawaii as a picture bride and lived her life as a laundress on a sugar plantation. She gave birth to three daughters, was widowed, and eventually died as a suicide by drowning before her fiftieth year.

Yamamoto's work is informed by an aesthetic of least means which is connect-



Lynne Yamamoto, *Ten in One Hour*, 1992-96, grated soap, artificial hair, glass, shelf brackets, light, wood, photograph, text, at The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu. (Photo: Daniel Mirer.)

ed as much to the impulses of conceptual and minimalist work as it is to a specifically Japanese sensibility of sparseness. The leanness and logic of form (key works employ a grid system) provide an essential counterpoint to the intimations of strong feeling and sensuality with which the work is also imbued. In the context of this tension of form and interpretation, the artist's astute engagement of materials provides critical connective tissue.

*Ten in One Hour*, an installation and in some ways a signature piece, is rich with allusions to Chiyo's life story, while in the same moment prompting a reading which could stand alone on the basis of an intuitive response to its materials. One hundred and twenty small glass shelves form a corner, each shelf supporting a hand-molded mass of grated, sweetly scented soap in which is embedded a tuft or tufts of black hair. A wooden box or bathtub is filled with a few hundred more such constructions, while a bare light bulb hangs suspended from the ceiling above it. The title, which alludes to the artist's own rate of production of the tufted soap pieces, invokes the repetitive and ephemeral nature of Chiyo's own labor. The setting calls up the intimacy, both chaste and erotic, of the bath and its rituals of cleansing; the bathtub, the locus of Chiyo's drowning, is an austere focal point which fixes an ominous undercurrent.

An untitled work from the *Wash Closet* installation lines another gallery wall: a row of 280 large, square nails, embedded in the wall at Chiyo's height (4 feet, 7

inches), each nailhead covered with a bit of paper on which is written a single word. Together, these fragments of text comprise a life story, a litany of solitary service and a powerful inner life.

Interspersed with everyday tasks (cook, clean, boil, scrub, wash, starch, bleach, iron) are the terse and poignant markers of Chiyo's personal history (arrive, marry, birth, nurse, lose, bury, mourn) and the increasing intensity of her emotional experience (hope, fear, whisper, worry, love, worry, wince, weep), forming an interior dialogue which escalates to a fast-cut mix of task and ultimate turmoil (love, fear, weep, rinse, starch, fold, drown).

It is Yamamoto's particular gift to be able to distill in this elegant, sensual gathering of materials a series of seven vignettes that speak as much to the exploration of her own personal and cultural identity as to the enduring presence and ultimate mortality of her grandmother Chiyo. That she does this without succumbing to the excessive freight of overtly sociopolitical agendas or obsessively hermetic personal musing is also part of that gift.

—Marcia Morse

*Submissions*, recent work by Lynne Yamamoto, through November 24 at The Contemporary Museum, 2411 Makiki Heights Dr., Honolulu.

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