
Lynne Yamamoto
'The Long Twilight'

*Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue, at 42d Street
Manhattan
Through April 23*

A young Japanese woman named Ayame may or may not have disappeared mysteriously in the 1930's, but Lynne Yamamoto, a young Hawaiian-born artist of Japanese descent, has set out to tell her tale. In this gallery-size installation, Ms. Yamamoto uses artifacts, photographs, furniture and a slew of tissue-paper dolls to suggest the circumstances of Ayame's life while aiming to throw light on more universal problems of femaleness and cultural identity.

She proposes that Ayame traveled to the United States in the 1890's to attend college, then re-

turned with her American friend Rose to Japan, where they both taught English. In the 1930's Ayame disappeared without a trace or a record of her death. The viewer tunes into this story in a setting reminiscent of a Victorian parlor, hung with willow-patterned wallpaper and festooned with row after row of the tiny tissue paper dolls, each with burn holes, perhaps to suggest psychic pain.

Arranged around the room are several visual clusters. Through one, a peephole in the wall, you glimpse a tiny, blurry photograph, presumably of two women talking. Near an ornate Victorian tête-à-tête chair of gilded wood is a glass showcase laid out with intimate artifacts: a row of tiny, enigmatic photographs, baby shoes, an old-fashioned pincushion, a box of teeth with "Ayame" and "Rose" written on them.

Completing the ensemble are a big wooden Japanese tea box with a print of two maidens pasted in its lid and a wrapping cloth on the floor containing such items as a beaded eye pillow and a lament by a nineteenth-century Japanese female poet.

The theme of past lives and the clouds they cast on the present is not an unfamiliar one in art by women, and Ms. Yamamoto herself has done several previous installations relating to the story of her grandmother, a mail-order bride from Japan unhappily resettled in Hawaii.

But this one about an imaginary heroine is ineffectual: visually too timid to engage the eye and not intense enough to be good theater.

GRACE GLUECK