

Lynne Yamamoto

by Jonathan Goodman

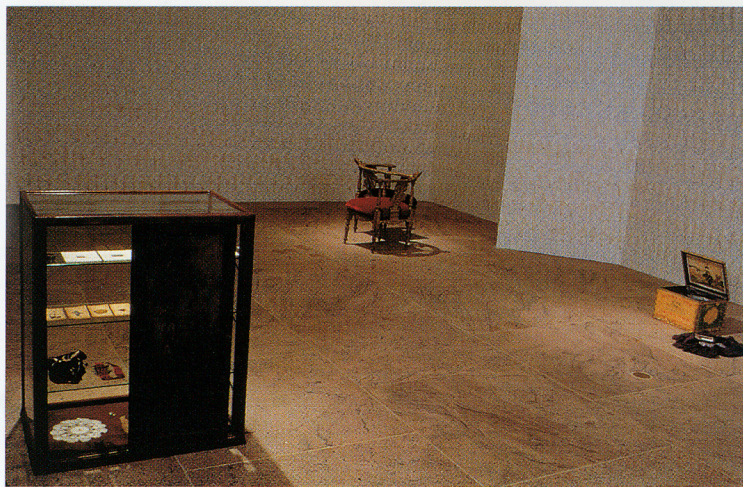
LYNNE YAMAMOTO,
The Long Twilight, 1999,
mixed-media installation
at the Whitney Museum
of Art at Philip Morris.
Courtesy: Whitney
Museum of American Art,
New York

The Long Twilight, Lynne Yamamoto's poetic, evocative installation, begins with a mysterious story, perhaps fabricated. Several boxes were sent anonymously to Yamamoto a year before the exhibition. According to the unsigned note Yamamoto received, they contained the effects of a woman named Ayame, born to a mercantile family in Japan in the 1860s. This person was

(evidently from the early twentieth century) of Japanese women studying in a library, and a silk eye pillow covered with glass beads. There was also a translation of a lyric by a Japanese woman poet from the ninth century: 'Should I have the chance/To see you again/ I'd search the four seas/Diving deep as the seas tangle'. The lines succinctly express the mood of this odd half-Japanese/half-Victorian environment. Partly a eulogy, partly a quiet expression of deep desire, the poem alludes to love and loss without saying so exactly. In much the same way *The Long Twilight* acknowledges a mystery, making poetry from what is not known: Ayame's relationship with Rose, her unmarked death.

The key to *The Long Twilight*'s morbid, intimate secrecy lies in our bemused contemplation of the installation's origins. Is the story true? But even if it were not, would it matter? Yamamoto's installation hovers between what may and may not have happened; the artifacts may or may not demonstrate friendship or a relationship involving physical intimacy. In the far wall of the gallery a small peephole, about four feet from the floor, reveals a photo, its focus blurred from long exposure: on the left a Japanese woman both faces the viewer and looks at a Caucasian woman with short brown hair. The picture does not feel antique – are we looking at Ayame and Rose, or Yamamoto and a friend? The image, like *The Long Twilight* itself, obscures or re-imagines fact as the starting point for a meditation on memory and truth, on how storytelling passes seamlessly from what must have happened to what might have been. Her piece floats, as its story does, among many possibilities, not all of them real.

Lynne Yamamoto was at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, 29 January – 23 April



sent to America and studied at Vassar College while in her mid-twenties; she eventually returned to Japan, where she lived with an American friend named Rose and wrote a number of articles for feminist publications. Her death, some time in the 1930s, is a puzzle, for there are no surviving records. The materials in the boxes document the belongings in Ayame and Rose's living room.

Working with these objects, Yamamoto has created a world of intimations and private suggestions. The gallery walls were decorated with a patterned wallpaper: white willow leaves on a light blue ground. Thousands of small paper dolls, made of silk sheets dotted with small burn holes, were tacked onto the wallpaper in horizontal rows. Three main objects sparsely occupied the large room: a tête-à-tête chair; an empty wooden tea chest with several items placed beside it; and a glass vitrine framed with thin strips of wood, offering on its four shelves a miscellany of intensely personal objects – white baby shoes sprouting hair, a folded black kimono decorated with a gold willow pattern, a group of watercolours consisting of abstract organic forms painted on pages taken from a Japanese dictionary, and a lace version of the silk cut-outs on the wall.

Next to the empty tea chest was a black wrapping cloth, a Japanese-English dictionary, a photograph

