

Textile Artist

**Yvonne
Wakabayashi:
Crafting
Memory**



BY EILEEN WHEELER

AS A YOUNG CANADIAN TEACHER on a quest to find her artistic voice and explore her heritage in 1983 in Japan, Yvonne Wakabayashi made a connection. In her hands was a *hera*, a Japanese stenciling tool that just felt right, and a crisp raw silk full of possibilities. Finding a malleable silk that could retain sculptural forms proved opportune for she was immersed in learning the traditional techniques of *shibori* to shape and manipulate textiles. Here her identity gelled, the materials and tools inspired her and she found a way to creatively blend these revelations with her western art training using the ancient *hera* in contemporary screen printing. Determined to honour her heritage and fascinated by the evocative power of objects, the artist has shaped and imprinted cloth to enact cultural memory.

As a maker of sculpture, narrative wall hangings and fashion pieces, Yvonne Wakabayashi of Burnaby, British Columbia has an international stature as an exhibiting textile artist. Although her initial drive was to engage her own family in its history, a sense of social responsibility deeply rooted in her ancestry means that her students and an ever wider community have benefitted from her enthusiastic instruction and community engagement. At the heart of her exhibited work, the artist communicates a respect for her craft's folk beginnings and the importance of remembrance. In the parlance of textile arts, Wakabayashi is a 'surface designer' who adds layers of meaning to fabric. In these layers of imbedded narratives that honour individuals and recurring images from the sea, she makes memory visible.

Yvonne Wakabayashi's personal artistic engagement with her culture and wider community originates from the aesthetics and social modeling of her parents. Unlike her father who was born on Salt Spring Island, BC, her mother arrived in Canada as a bride from Japan and imparted culture and fundamentals of design to her daughter as she added beauty and places of calm reflection to her home. Through Mrs. Tasaka's practice of *Ikebana* with her careful arrangements of single branches or wild flowers and the *Ocha* tea ceremony that used elegant utensils or by her wearing of *kimono*, a young Yvonne was steeped in Japanese sensibilities. As role models both parents were deeply engaged in community involvement and extended family responsibilities that increased dramatically when the Canadian state intervened forcefully in their lives during WWII. Her parents' example has been integral to how the artist practices her craft.

Although it occupies a large part in family memory, 'internment' is not a word used often by Yvonne Wakabayashi; you are much more likely to hear 'sacrifice and hard work' when discussing those lives she wishes to memorialize. With internment Koji and Ayame Tasaka (a school principal and teacher respectively) lost their liberty, property and professional status. When banished to BC's interior in the 40s, Mrs. Tasaka disassembled her husband's business suits to tailor fine children's wear to help her children stay warm and fit in socially, a determined resistance to being cast as a victim. Rather than focusing on this fracture of the family's lives, the artist



ABOVE: Yvonne Wakabayashi, *Shibori pole wrapping and indigo dyeing*, 2004.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



OPPOSITE PAGE: Yvonne Wakabayashi, *Water's Edge II* (detail), 2003. Indigo dye, Japanese Gunma silk, beads, *arashi shibori*, bound 3D forms. 153 cm h x 54 cm w x 16 cm d.

PHOTO: KENJI NAGAI



ABOVE: The artist's mother, Ayame (centre), wearing indigo and ikat uniform, Japan, mid 1920s.
IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

was profoundly influenced by the calm and determined way her parents dealt with a harsh reality. She purposefully selects memory with a focus on the dignity and willingness of her family to re-engage society after the war. "Internment definitely shaped the artist in me but I am not capable of making social comments on negative things."¹ In this understated witnessing of history the artist implicitly echoes the quiet dignity of elders who say '*Shikata ga nai*' or 'such is life'. Rather than dwell on misfortune, she determined her own focus; Wakabayashi creatively engages concepts of heritage, dignity and responsibility and sometimes simply focuses on the evocative sea.

A distinctive wall piece, *Water's Edge III* (2003), illustrates Yvonne Wakabayashi's thematic and technical approach. Emblematic of Japan, indigo dye by its very nature sits on the surface as a lingering presence. *Shibori* physically shapes the silk and lends itself to visual, tactile and metaphorical forms. *Arashi Shibori*, a refinement in the shaping techniques of *shibori*, traditionally entails making patterns that echo a rainstorm by tightly compressing fabric with wrapped threads around a pole before dyeing. Once dried, the folds are retained leaving a memory on the fabric. The process produces highly individual impressions of the touch of the artisan as the level of force applied and the nature of stitches shapes how the dye is recorded by the cloth². "The 'eastern' process of creating *arashi shibori* captivates and lures me to play and manipulate an undulating surface". This surface almost invariably suggests images of the sea.

RIGHT: Yvonne Wakabayashi, *Wearable lace dress* (purple), 2011. Felted *katazome* stencil and *shibori* on wool.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

As the foremost expert of this practice in Canada, Wakabayashi combines ancient and new techniques to "create works that metaphorically reflect her interest in water"³. Close inspection of the sculpture reveals myriad forms that are inspired by the designer's penchant for collecting interesting shapes on her walks by the ocean in coastal BC. Her choice of imagery is embedded in her family as the sea is the defining feature of Sashima Island, the ancestral home of her mother and paternal grandparents.

The sea as metaphor helps us consider juxtaposed elements in a memorial to ancestors with its 'interpretive thread'.⁴ In *Sea of Seto: Ancestral Home* (2012), Wakabayashi recreates the faces of her Tasaka ancestors and imbeds fragments of their textile culture and generations of affinity with their Inland Sea. Wakabayashi juxtaposes their ancestral home with an implicit Canadian history that might have left their sacrifices and accomplishments forgotten. The strains of immigration and internment in her own family and the one into which she married, suggests another reason the imagery of family and the sea are intertwined in her craft; the sea endures.

Using imagery internalized by time spent at the water's edge in Canada and Japan, Wakabayashi has crafted sculptures such as *Nautilus* (2012) where the evocative nature of the sea is uppermost. Using pineapple fibre and *Gunma* silk that retains its sericin, allows for a voluptuous shaping of sea forms that merges her Japanese sensibility with contemporary craft. "These precious ancestral materials, inspiring in themselves, allow me to merge ideas creating pieces that articulate simplicity and austerity".

In a wall piece, *Tides of Life: Ancestral Home* (2011) Wakabayashi crafts a tribute without the restrictions imposed by an upcoming exhibition. She uses the *hera*, her favourite tool. "I'm little... it fits in my hand; it's an extension of me". Although the *hera* is conventionally used to spread *katazome* paste in a Japanese stenciling process, Wakabayashi uses it to disperse and mix colour as she works in her background of ancestral maps. On this surface Wakabayashi gathers other meaningful elements. She continues to be influenced by her early art instructor, artist and friend Gordon Smith ("my teacher for life" she maintains) in how she contemplates and arranges various elements on her canvas of un-dyed natural hemp sourced in Japan. Adding layers of meaning, the hemp is stiffened with resin and shaped on a *shibori* pole, a touch of gold is added to echo Japanese woodblock screens and lines of traditional *sashiko* stitching are added. A dash of sheen from her mother's black calligraphy paper leads the eye in the composition. A spool of linen thread given to her decades earlier by Penny Gouldstone, her University of BC instructor who first encouraged her to go to Japan, provides tufts that rise beyond the surface. Finally, both the Tasaka and Wakabayashi crests add her signature to this repository of cultural memory.

The impetus to create visual narratives came in 1981 with the loss of Yvonne Wakabayashi's mother. The choice of textiles as a form of communication is a reflection of her mother's expert needlecraft skills honed in Japan, revived in internment and used to provide a family income through her dressmaking business on their return to Vancouver. It was also therapeutic. As Bruce Metcalf has said "Craft can function as a vehicle to construct meaning that gives substance and dignity to individuals' lives".⁵ It clearly has been gratifying to this artist to honour her parent in a textile form that reframes Ayame Tasaka to a wider society apprising them of her tenacity not only to survive but to re-engage positively with a society that had excluded her. The art making also solidified Wakabayashi's own identity. Laurel Thayer Ulrich finds family





ABOVE: Yvonne Wakabayashi, *Sea of Seto: Ancestral Home*, 2012. Screen printing, collage, stitching, piecing on hemp and *sumi* paper, Japanese calligraphy, linen/silk thread. 44 cm h x 100 cm w x 4 cm d. PHOTO: KENJI NAGAI.

identities, as well as personal ones, "are built from selective fragments of the past— names, stories, and material possessions...that can be lost or re-created, abandoned or invented"⁶. Her selections as an artist were confirmed when she found a school photograph of her mother's taken in Japan about 1920 that enthralled her. "I looked at my mother's high school yearbook and examined her school uniform. It was indigo and ikat!" The fact that the artist was already exploring these two processes, creating pattern with indigo on tied fabric, affirmed both a sense of belonging and her choice of materials.

The artist has also created many different 'Art Wear' fashion pieces, some with overt sculptural elements from the sea. Two of Yvonne Wakabayashi's garments were in Powerhouse Museum's 2011-2013 *Love Lace*, an exhibition in Sydney, Australia designed to provocatively question traditional concepts of lace.⁷ For this challenge the *shibori* elements became less apparent in her singular garments. Japanese wool jersey, felted so it will not fray, has been incised to create a unique pattern that echoes the stencil process of *katazome* that had been the focus of the designer's graduate work decades earlier. All of Yvonne Wakabayashi's garments are immensely popular with students when she appears as a guest speaker sharing her 'studio secrets' and permitting her admirers to try on her unstructured fashions with their complex surfaces. Referring to her years in Canadian fashion classrooms of her own until 2002 and those she visits now, the artist stresses the 'reciprocal' relationship, how teaching and interacting with dynamic students enhances the contemporary elements she blends with ancient practices.

Giving Memory

Although pleased when there is corporate interest in her sculptural forms Yvonne Wakabayashi is, at this point in 'downsizing' her studio, unconcerned about maintaining exclusive access to her work. With many honours, awards and successful art exhibitions behind her, it is the charitable support she can offer that gives her deep satisfaction. It is not only the surfaces where "I record the values and sense of self that have been bestowed on me"⁸ that fulfill her goals but an engagement with her community. She recently provided garments and donated sculptural

pieces for a fashion show fundraiser in support of 1200 Japanese tsunami orphans; this gave her great pleasure. As destructive as the sea was in that instance, as a maker of marine inspired shapes, she hopes to offer a soothing image of the sea from her heritage. "In whatever I do I always remember the example my parents set. It's as though they gave me the strength or power to create."

As Yvonne Wakabayashi transforms her heritage into the language of textiles, she crafts her own objects of memory; these can preserve a sense of family that overcomes a history of dislocation.⁹ By further presenting textile art in the public realm, we witness and can consider the threads that bind family and community. ■

(ENDNOTES)

1. All quotes from conversations with Yvonne Wakabayashi 2001-2014 unless otherwise noted
2. Yoshiko Wada, *Memory on cloth : shibori now*. (New York: Kodansha International, 2002) 178
3. Lesley Richmond, (2005). Textile Artist: Yvonne Wakabayashi. *Nikkei Images - National Nikkei Museum and Heritage Centre Newsletter*, 10 (1) 4
4. Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and material culture*. (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 8
5. Bruce Metcalf, *Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview*. In J. Johnson (Ed.), *Exploring contemporary craft : history, theory & critical writing* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2002) 17
6. Laurel Thayer Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and stories in the creation of an American myth*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) 135
7. <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/lovelace>, accessed 29 May 2014
8. Yvonne Wakabayashi, *Artist's Statement*, March, 2014
9. Gaynor Kavanagh, *What is memory? and Remembering and forgetting*. In *Dream spaces : memory and the museum* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) 23