

“Yellow Terror” exhibit shows dangers of stereotypes, teaches critical thinking

“Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura”
 On view April 11 through July 16, 2017
 Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center
 121 N.W. Second Avenue, Portland

By **Ryan Nakano**
The Asian Reporter

Yellow Terror. It's the stereotypical Fu Manchu Halloween mask. It's the old “Jap Hunting License” bought and sold. It's the grouping of several ethnic backgrounds and cultures into a common enemy with a toothy barbaric grin and slanted eyes.

It's also the name of an art exhibit on view at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center (ONLC) in Portland. “Yellow Terror” showcases original paintings and a collection of World War II propaganda by Roger Shimomura, a Seattle-based contemporary artist whose work often plays off Asian stereotypes and American iconography in a kind of satirical pop art where east meets west.

Shimomura, who spent years of his childhood behind barbed-wire fences during the internment of more than 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent during World War II, recounts the nationalistic fervor and fear that spread throughout the country and worked its way into the everyday lives of citizens with “Slap a Jap” postcards, ornate “Oriental” salt-and-pepper shakers, and more.

“It is my sincerest hope that this body of material will serve as an effective metaphor for all types of racial stereotyping, for our government has shown that during times of national crises, lessons of past injustices to its own citizens are usually forgotten,” Shimomura wrote to conclude the exhibit's artist statement back in 2006, when the display first found its way into the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle's Chinatown-International District.

Now — 11 years later, on the heels of two travel bans issued in executive orders signed by President Donald Trump and the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066 signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which ordered the forced removal and internment of people of Japanese ancestry — Shimomura's statement has resurfaced, standing the test of time.

“It turns out to be quite accurate, at times of stress, and I think that one would have to agree that these are times of stress, in this case, that the top executive of the country has forgotten these lessons. When asked about [internment] camps, he said he might agree with that decision,” Shimomura told *The Asian Reporter*. “That in itself is still an outrage.”

In turn, Shimomura reawakens the outrageous images that have historically been used against people of Asian descent in the United States in the condensed exhibit currently housed at ONLC, a space dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Japanese-American community in Oregon and the greater Pacific Northwest.

Underneath the glass of a display case, an ashtray reads “Jam your cigarette butts in this rat,” referring to its cartoon depiction of a swastika, rising sun, and sinister-looking rodent with slanted eyes and a knife in hand.

Across the room, there's a wall. On the wall hang rows of vintage Halloween masks — a retro display of Asian stereotypes for mass consumption.

Then, of course, there are Shimomura's



SHOWCASING STEREOTYPES. “Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura,” an exhibit of Shimomura's paintings — which challenge the role of media and material culture in defining the American norm — as well as his collection of memorabilia and objects depicting racial stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans accumulated during the last 20 years, is scheduled to be on view at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center in Portland from April 11 through July 16. Shimomura, who spent years of his childhood behind barbed-wire fences during the internment of more than 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent during World War II, recounts the nationalistic fervor and fear that spread throughout the country and worked its way into the everyday lives of citizens with “Slap a Jap” postcards, ornate “Oriental” salt-and-pepper shakers (left photo), vintage Halloween masks (right photo), and more. (AR Photos/Ryan Nakano)



because they reflect the repercussions of a country in fear, and its people in peril from its own government.

“So many things in our political climate come down to stereotypes of not just people, but places and things. It's an oversimplistic way of viewing the world and when it happens, the first thing to go out the window is our sensitivity toward people,” Shimomura said. “That's why stereotypes are so dangerous ... they play on our worst fears.”

“Yellow Terror” is on display April 11 through July 16 at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, located at 121 N.W. Second Avenue in Portland. To learn more, or to verify open hours, call (503) 224-1458 or visit <www.oregonnikkei.org>.

paintings which, much like the propaganda from the war, are bold, vibrant, colorful, full of life, and, of course, full of stereotypes.

In “eBay Citizen #2,” Shimomura centralizes the iconic yellow face, squinty eyes, and bucktooth grin of Dick Tracy sidekick Joe Jitsu, who became popularized in 1961 for his catchphrase “So sorry!” and “Excuse, please” in the animated version of the comic.

And yet, by title alone, Shimomura works to decentralize the character, thereby recognizing that the Joe Jitsu depiction is not an isolated incident, but just one citizen among many who has captured the public eye and in turn perpetuated a stereotype to be branded and sold to the highest bidder as one might find on an online buying-and-selling service such as eBay — the same place Shimomura purchased many of the materials housed in the exhibit.

“Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura,” which is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday from 11:00am to 3:00pm and Sunday from noon to 3:00pm, was brought to ONLC as part of a grant awarded to the Oregon Nikkei Endowment to work in conjunction with the Common Core Curriculum project Digital Citizenship and Japanese American History.

The project is intended to teach middle school students how to “become critical thinkers, effective communicators, and responsible citizens” through the study of World War II-era anti-Japanese propaganda and its relation to prejudice and stereotypes.

“The student groups that have already come through and been able to see the



Thai jungle seen as breeding ground for Indochinese tigers

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ing and illegal rosewood logging” in the eastern jungle.

“The Thai forestry department proved that with protection you can not only bring tigers back, but now the western forest complex, specifically Huai Kha Khaeng, is a global model of tiger conservation,” Alan Rabinowitz, the chief executive officer of Panthera said in a video call from New York. “It is one of the best protected and best tiger areas left in the world. Thailand has shown that you can protect tigers and bring them back. They can do this now in the eastern forest complex as they've done in the western forest complex.”

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