

My Corner of the World - Irene Kubota
Bryan Ohno Gallery, February 7 - March 2, 2019



Quiet by nature, Irene Kubota, often doesn't draw with any goal or design in mind. Surrounded by grandchildren, a natural state for her to be in recently, she plays with her drawing tools on paper. In that process, she will arrive at an expression. Is it an unconscious act? In many ways, yes, not different from a child that just draws. It's a basic human act, similar to early man in caves thousands of years ago.

Bryan Ohno Gallery for its February showing, enthusiastically presents Irene Kubota's drawings entitled, "My Corner of the World." This is Kubota's second one-person exhibition at the gallery located at 521 S. Main Street (Japan Town), Seattle,

WA 98104. The show will run from February 7 to March 2, 2019 with the artist reception opening on First Thursday, February 7, 2019 from 6:00-8:00pm.

Kubota's expressions are visceral; contrary to the over-analytical and message-driven expressions we see in the art world today. It is a feeling, an impression, that puts a smile on a viewer. For those who are in a logical rush to understand may glance at her drawings and be perplexed as to its simplicity, that it should possess the craftsmanship to emulate an object. This is where her work, like many great artists who preceded her, tirelessly tries to go back to the innocence of a child-like state of mind, the playful mind. Picasso famously said, "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child." Her art, is not imagined through words where we most use as a modern thinking tool. To her, words are harsh. She is not equipped to express the cycle of life succinctly through words. Words have exclamation points that lock in a notion of permanence. Think of it as a metaphor in music. You enjoy the melody while it happens. No composer or conductor rushes to the end. Art is about the continuous state of play, an expression that embraces the full cycle of human interaction. Rather than hide her expressions through abstract art, like the modernist painter, Marc Chagall, she brings in humans, animals and mythical creatures to form an impression. An impression of human living. That includes the parody of eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Wonder bread, and Spam *musubi* on the side as her two cultures collide.



Kubota is a Japanese-American artist who was born the same year her family was sent to a concentration camp because of the color of their skin and the political hysteria and fear of the time. This, in many ways, have influenced her art. Japanese-Americans while regaining their freedom from the camps after World War II, many remained spiritually trapped in the barbwire of the camp. Her artwork triumphantly and rebelliously breaks out of this trap. We are delighted to share the power of art and how it can positively engage our lives in the busy, complicated and challenging modern lifestyle of America we call, "The Land of the Free."



Irene Kubota was born into a conflict of walls. As a Japanese-American born during World War II, she was one of 120,000 Japanese-Americans placed in concentration camps because of her heritage. Her memories growing up was different from her parents who were first-generation Americans or *Issei*. She witnessed and experienced all her parent's hard work building over 20 years of their life in America shattered and deemed worthless.

In 1942, the year Kubota was born in Seattle, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. All Japanese-Americans living in the west coast were forcefully detained and relocated to concentration camps. Her family, among others of Japanese descent, were given 7 days to pack their lives into two suitcases. They were transported by train, in a cow cargo compartment, to the Puyallup Fairgrounds. They were eventually processed and encamped in Minidoka near Twin Falls, Idaho, a barb-wired encampment surrounded by armed guards in towers.

After the war, the family returned to their former home. Their livelihood that thrived in Japan town before the war was reduced to nothing. Before the war, S. Main Street between 5th & 7th Avenues were bustling with over 100 merchants - bakers, travel agents, realtors, and florists, called *Shotengai* (商店街), or a street of stores. They were all gone. The Uwajimaya grocery store and New Fashion Tailor (where the Bryan Ohno Gallery is located today) resumed their prewar operations. Businesses began to thrive again, albeit slowly, with leftover racism and discrimination still very much alive. Years later, this injustice was brought to light. In 1980, President Carter began the inquiry to determine whether the decision to put Japanese-Americans into internment camps had been justified. It took 8 years by the time President Reagan brought about a settlement that paid each interned Japanese-American a pittance in exchange for their loss of possessions and spirit -\$20,000 for their pain and suffering. The land of the free is reserved for the right heritage.

It is in this America, that Irene Kubota found her way to art and her expressions. Kubota earned her MFA at Syracuse University, a contemporary to fellow painter Roger Shimomura. While Shimomura directly challenges the viewer of Japanese-American discrimination, Kubota gracefully shows the conciliatory approach. She finds a new way to communicate and softens ideological divide or conflict. She accomplishes this so effectively and so unconsciously. Her colors are warm, though some of the subjects depict fear. Why? Because "fear" in her mind doesn't have to be a constant. It is a natural human emotion that we breathe into a more positive state. It is a cycle of rhythm she recognizes. Her subjects are often between human and animal - a cute animal or a mythical, indescribable animal. It looks as though they are having a friendly conversation when, in fact it may be a quietly contentious moment. Through Kubota's eyes, she always wanted to avoid conflict. Growing up after post World War II, it was a common saying amongst Japanese American to express the word *Hazukashii* (恥ずかしい) - embarrassing or "*Gaman shinasai* (我慢しなさい) - Just take it and don't complain."

Don't do anything embarrassing, it draws attention. In other words, "shut up and be quiet," living in a mild form of everyday fear. 75 years later, we can find resemblance and history repeating itself today.

In her corner of the world, there is no judgement, nor does she use the word *Hazukashii* nor *Gaman*. It's a state of humans coexisting with a whimsical touch. Perhaps it's a lighthearted state we can learn to practice more and to perpetuate through our media and social networks.

