

Patricia Grieve Watkinson
Essay: Linda Okazaki paintings

Fire inside the Heart

There's a painting where a couple sits on an elegant velvet sofa. She, youthful, is in an alluring pose, and naked. He, older, is fully clothed and at ease as he puffs on a corn cob pipe. We are reminded of the odalisques of art history, or perhaps the figures in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. We might also reflect on "the male gaze" ... except this male gazes directly out of the painting at us, the viewers.

Coffee, Crackers, and Criticism is the title that Linda Okazaki gave this painting in 1974. It is autobiographical: she is the nude seated next to her admired teacher Gaylen Hansen. Newly graduated with a master's in fine art, Okazaki tellingly portrays the vulnerability that any student, male or female, feels when critiqued by the professor. She also alludes to the centuries-long objectification of women in art and, equally significantly, to her own experiences as a lone female graduate student in a not-always-kind male world, where a fellow artist once urinated on her work.

Gaylen Hansen was an art professor at Washington State University, Pullman, together with Robert Helm, Robert Ecker, and Patrick Siler—all influential figures for Okazaki. Her years there as a student and then as associate art professor were formative. Pullman in the late 60s and 70s was often seen as a regional "school" of art, with influences from Bay Area Funk and the Chicago Imagists. Pullman artists used narrative imagery, a faux-naïve style, coupled with curious juxtapositions and a fantastical sense of place often informed by the unique Palouse landscape. Eccentric humor abounded as well as a lack of pretension, perhaps only possible because of the region's isolation from other art centers. Okazaki's personal narrative style, emotional expressiveness, and often low-key playfulness emerged against this background. Her use of flattened perspective, intentionally awkward compositions, and consciously naïve renderings were in keeping with her colleagues'. But she also developed an individualistic use of watercolor where drawn outlines are filled in with flat washes of color and the painting's surface becomes a decorative whole. With evident delight in pattern, she incorporated figured carpets, busy wallpapers, and striped fabrics; even foliage and rippling expanses of water were to become decorative elements.

Interweaving autobiography and fantasy, often with dream-derived imagery, was to be Okazaki's lifelong preoccupation. She had much to dream about, and even more to give her nightmares. When she was six, in the night, her mother was shot dead in the bedroom next door by a lover who then took his own life. The awful murder and ensuing childhood trauma have played themselves out both subtly and explicitly in Okazaki's art. The bedroom has become a recurrent image. In the enigmatic work *Night Journey (1975)* a couple lie on a brass bedstead. Slippers under the bed, the nightstand with an alarm clock, the glimpse of a kitchen through an open door—these are touches of quotidian reality, memories of childhood. The rest is fantasy: the woman is a disembodied Noh mask; her partner, a white bird. Huge immovable rocks cover the bed with the weight of unbearable grief. Yet there seems to be redemption: a white bird flies up as if a soul is released, leaving only a shadow on the rock. And plants

with ripe fruits grow around the bed, suggesting that time has passed and that regeneration can happen.

Okazaki's work is full of enigmatic symbolism. Often the symbols emerge from her subconscious through dreams and are then incorporated into her regular artistic vocabulary. At other times, she is aware of using archetypal symbols—water, fire, emblematic creatures such as birds, fish, or dogs—as well as mythical beings, for example, the fearful Gorgon with extended tongue, from Greek myth. Her understanding of these symbols comes from studying a wide range of writers and thinkers, from Carl Jung to Jidda Krishnamurti, from Paul Bowles to Jorge Luis Borges.

In 1980, Okazaki left the high plateau of Eastern Washington, left the university where she was also a faculty wife, and chose to live, equally remotely, in Port Townsend on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. Here, surrounded by lush vegetation and the vast expanses of the Salish Sea, she has settled permanently in a supportive community, remarried, raised three children, and kept an active studio practice.

The painting *Fisher King and Blanche (1981)* reflects the artist's entry to this new life. It is a familiar scene of the Olympic Peninsula, looking across the water with a distant ferry boat and a rose-colored moon low on the horizon. This identifiable exterior world, however, pales against Okazaki's rich interior one, where magic realism and layered symbolism hold sway. While the distant ferry has a lone, anonymous figure silhouetted on deck, the rest of the painting abounds with specific, if enigmatic, characters. In the foreground the artist ("Blanche") has been met by two creatures—a large raven and a coyote. Both are important representatives of Native American myths of the Pacific Northwest, and each is unpredictable. The coyote, known for his shape-shifting abilities, wears the richly feathered head of a kingfisher and grips the artist's shoulder with his paw. Behind them the water reflects bright moonlight with calligraphic shapes that have a life of their own. In the darker areas of water, however, other creatures are partially visible: the fearful Gorgon rises statue-like; two gray sentinels, part stone, part cloud, face each other as if marking a passage; and hidden yet deeper is the shadowy form of a huge beast. He, too, is Coyote, that ever-changing, ever-moving Trickster. All these creatures gather around the artist as she faces a future that has yet to reveal itself. They represent fearfulness, ambiguity, and the unknown. The very image of the kingfisher shifts to become "Fisher King" in the word-play of the painting's title. This wounded king from Celtic myth was not able to heal his wounds until the right question was put to him. He, too, is a symbol of Okazaki's quest to find her inner voice and to liberate her imagination from the past.

While the symbolism of her imagery has life-affirming meaning for Okazaki, she also sees the act of painting as vital to her well-being. Making a work of art is a way to transfer her inner feelings, conscious and unconscious, and to create a place that safely encapsulates those feelings and protects her from them. The work of art then becomes her own "icon," not merely representing emotions but actually holding them. She also distinguishes between paintings that are a precise reenactment of dreams, holding her unconscious emotions and imagery, and those that are dreamlike in their intention and affect.

River Story (1987) and *Unusual Dream* (1993) are among those works that recreate specific dreams—each constructed from symbols that are at once personal and yet sufficiently archetypal to have all the ingredients of a universal myth. In *River Story*, the artist swims upstream with effort, her long hair blending into the ripples of the water. With one arm she clutches a black bird while around her float three transparent urns. With the other arm she reaches toward a striped shape on a platform. In her dream the urns were rose-colored glass, the bird a carved obsidian raven, and the figure a Native American tribal chief.¹ Only later did Okazaki understand that the figure is much like a photograph of her mother, standing on a wharf, shortly before her death.

Unusual Dream might be characterized as a myth of creation, transformation, or perhaps spiritual ascension. Here a large phallic-looking fish emerges from water. A winged centaur opens the fish's gills to release a winged woman, who flies upwards into the night sky led by a flying fish and two white birds. As in all Okazaki's work, the opportunity for interpretation exists on many levels; this is true not only for the viewer but also for the artist, the dreamer, to whom these images and stories come unbidden.

On the other hand, in a painting such as *Passion's Moment* (1999) Okazaki's intention is to create a work that others will understand in a dreamlike, surrealistic fashion....A flood engulfs an ancient courtyard in a building that is architecturally ambiguous. A tree outside is visible through an archway, yet it casts a shadow on an interior wall. Sheets of paper float on the water, some with annotated music, others handwritten. Mysteriously, they are on fire. Are they the "momentary passion" of Okazaki's title? In the courtyard stands a fountain, a sculpture of a weeping woman pouring water from an urn into the basin at her feet. Her sorrowful tears fall into the fountain, just as the waters of the fountain join the flood, and the flood moves into the world beyond.

Water is a major theme in Okazaki's work. Whether it be the vast expanses of the Salish Sea, or smaller ponds, pools, rivers and streams... water is everywhere. There are flooded buildings with swimmers, courtyards with water-carrier sculptures, stone wells and fountains, and overflowing pitchers. There is rain that falls across the picture plane...and there are tears. The artist speaks of the many meanings and the affinities that water has for her: it is the constant in her daily life in Port Townsend; it is the carrier of the unconscious mind; it is the most mutable of the elements, able to change texture and color constantly. "The full color palette is there in water," she says "like the changing face of Monet's Rouen Cathedral."

Fire too has its place. Bursts of flame spontaneously escape from the ground in several paintings, as if releasing the energy of the earth's molten core. They capture the artist's visceral empathy with the active forces of nature. Fire is also a symbol of human passion, of anguish and of love. Flames may erupt from the written page of a letter or blossom from the breast of a figure. In *Fire inside the Heart* (1998), flames become part of the repeated pattern of the woman's dress as she dances or floats with her lover to the strains of Erik Satie's music.

Okazaki refers to a diverse assortment of fellow artists as she reflects on her own work/connection. Joan Brown, from whom she took a workshop, was a major influence, especially in her personalized subject matter. Fay Jones in Seattle, she says, “combines intelligence with humility.” Inspiration has come from Japanese woodblock prints, Indian miniatures, ancient Egyptian art, and from Goethe’s color theories. Okazaki mentions Van Gogh, Gauguin, Chagall, Rousseau, as well as David Hockney, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Albert Pinkham Ryder and Northwest Mystics such as Kenneth Callahan and Morris Graves. She has spent hours in museums in front of paintings by Matisse and Bonnard, drawing intently. And her admiration for Morandi’s ability to exploit the tension between objects is revealed in a recent series of wonderfully joyful paintings that clearly celebrate domestic life and the riches of the earth. *Bouillabaisse with Lester (2010)* displays fresh seafood ingredients on a red table along with the family cat. *Mourning Dove with Goldfish and Papaya (2011)* is a still-life with luscious fruit surrounding a vase of garden flowers. Both works give more than a passing nod to the sensuous joy of Matisse and the intense color of Bonnard.

In a totally different vein, Okazaki also cites the work of German artist, Neo Rauch, and the New Leipzig School. She believes that Rauch achieves something that she, too, strives for: he brings together disparate elements that seem to tell a meaningful story, but closer inspection reveals only enigmas. There is a synchronicity in such work: as disparate elements come together, they create a momentary sense of rightness. It is this sense that Okazaki seeks in a work such as *Music is the Muse (1998)*, a landscape painting that incorporates another, finished painting within it. The inset painting is complex: a courtyard with ominous figures appearing in an archway and a curving flight of stairs with a woman huddled at its foot. Spurts of flame shoot out of the earth and a spring, too, bursts forth. It flows out of the inset picture into the surrounding landscape where it pools beside two sheets of music. We can see that the song title is “For All We Know.” Maybe some viewers will recall the lyrics “For all we know, this may only be a dream. We come and go like a ripple on a stream.” Certainly Okazaki’s choice is intentional: this is her version of synchronicity and surrealism at work.

Just as divergent as Okazaki’s personal pantheon of artists, writers, and composers, has been her chosen forms of artistic expression over a career of four decades. She has found inspiration in daily life as well as in revealing dreams, in the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest as well as those of the subconscious mind. At various times she has used media quite different from her usual watercolor— collage, printmaking, oils, and most recently gesso on Arches paper. A counterpoint to her colorful work, the gesso paintings are monochrome black and white. They also necessitate a technique that is much more spontaneously vigorous than the precision of watercolors—a change that Okazaki welcomes, if only for a while.

Water Traffic (2012) is one such work and a telling reflection of Okazaki’s lifelong concerns. In this painting the waters and shipping of the Puget Sound come disturbingly close to the windows of a cozy living room. There is an empty armchair lit by a solitary lamp and a ubiquitous, lounging cat. A coffee table has mementos of Okazaki’s old buddies from long ago: a ceramic plate by Patrick Siler; books about Robert Helm and Gaylen Hansen. A *New Yorker* magazine cover suggests the world beyond Okazaki’s Port Townsend home. Yet a curtain pulled to one side of the painting says that we are looking

at the scene from a play, that this is theater. A woman exits stage right. Once the curtain is redrawn, the room will no longer exist. Is this moment from everyday life also a dream? Do Borges' words, so meaningful for Okazaki as she quotes his essay *The Circular Ruins*, echo her own intent?...

“With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.”

Patricia Grieve Watkinson
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Patricia Grieve Watkinson is an art and museum consultant in Seattle. She is the former director of the Museum of Art at Washington State University, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana, and Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State. She is an essayist on the art and artists of the Pacific Northwest.

ⁱ This essay is based on conversations with Linda Okazaki during January and February, 2013.