

Imperial Animations in Transpacific Contemporary Art

Namiko Kunimoto

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Namiko Kunimoto's *Imperial Animations in Transpacific Contemporary Art* arrives at a much-needed time when the highly polarized political landscape of the present demands a reckoning with its past. Kunimoto offers an incisive and insightful analysis of how transpacific contemporary artists visualize and critique ongoing imperial formations amid the global emergence of liberal capitalism across gender, race, and geopolitics.

With the conceptual framework of "imperial animations," Kunimoto analyzes how multimedia artists go beyond a simple consideration of historical events by "animating history" to interpret how global capitalism relies on a presentation of an imagined conservative past to shape a contemporary form of aspirational fascism becoming widespread in today's digital media landscape. By focusing on Japanese imperialism with its desire for geographical expansion, Kunimoto curates a unique selection of case studies to examine transpacific relations and trace how contemporary artists animate colonial histories, through performance and digital transformation, to uncover the forgotten complicities of Japan's nationalistic empire and articulate present-day ramifications in places such as Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and Canada. Kunimoto ultimately challenges readers to take a deeper look at how imperialism, liberalism, and aspirational fascism are deeply intertwined with the media, to view them not as new creations but as developments from Japan's imperial past, and to consider how each of us may be complicit in this growing form of fascistic power.

Kunimoto opens her book by intertwining a discussion of liberal democracy and its contributions to the rise of fascism with global capitalism today with the legacy of Japanese colonialism in Taiwan. Through the two-part project, *Crystal Seeding* (2021) and *There is Another Capital beneath the Waves* (2023), by Taiwan-based artists Chang Ting Tong, Hsu Chia-Wei, and Cheng Hsien-Yu, Kunimoto provides an example of how artworks, upon first glance, may not seem to reveal much, but with an understanding of the unspoken past, operate as a form of questioning imperial history and its ongoing presence. As imperial animations, *Crystal Seeding* and *Another Capital* use 3D printing, a robotic arm, experimental instruments, and virtual reality to engage with the violent colonial past and contend with the present-day aftermath of forcefully imposed imperial modernization in Taiwan. Through these works, Kunimoto strategically introduces many overarching aspects of the case studies that make up the full-length chapters, such as the presentation of local history through site-specificity and the bridging of expansive historical lineages via digital media.

The first chapter begins with the 2019 Aichi Triennale controversy to demonstrate how contemporary institutions are often at fault for complying with censorship under pressure from the imperial system. One of the censored works, Shimada Yoshiko's *A Picture to Be Burnt* (1993),

notably featured on the cover of the book, exemplifies how one should move past the initial impression that this work is simply an expression of anti-imperialism. When taking the steps to understand Shimada's original intent, which was to critique the institutional powers that originally censored Oura Nobuyuki's *Holding Perspective* series (1982–1985) and its depictions of Emperor Hirohito in the 1990s, an even darker irony surfaces, revealing the legacy of fascistic institutional powers nearly thirty years later. Going deeper into Shimada's oeuvre, Kunimoto examines the multinational, transpacific issue of sexual slavery through the animated presence of Shimada's performance piece *Being a Statue of a Japanese "Comfort Woman"* (2012–), which addresses the ongoing debate over the recognition of comfort women today. In doing so, Kunimoto reveals the linked genealogies of institutionalized and militarized violence against women in Japanese colonies as well as within the nation itself.

Chapter two shifts to a singular focus on Goto Yasuka, an artist from Hiroshima, who utilizes ballpoint pens, Japanese ink lines, and a simplified manga-like style to reconsider the militaristic past of famous postwar Japanese artists. Beneath the surface of these candid portraits of Fujita Tsuguharu, Miyamoto Saburo, Tsuruta Goro, and Koiso Ryohei, Kunimoto traces their tainted histories as accomplished war painters in the Japanese occupation of Singapore. Kunimoto also notes Goto's depiction of the famed postwar artist Okamoto Taro and his complicity as a Japanese Imperial Army soldier in China. Goto's work prompts the viewer to be critical of how these art historical figures are framed in the present, particularly how Japanese art history has failed to view them beyond passive victims by praising their artistic capabilities and refusing to acknowledge their fascist culpability before and during World War II. Kunimoto makes clear that Goto's work is not meant to accuse these artists of wrongdoings. In fact, Goto's work also draws on her own family's complicity with the war. Kunimoto ultimately argues that through Goto's contemporary graphic medium and rather mundane animations of notable Japanese artists conducting everyday activities in their war attire, these works intend to provoke everyone in Japan to reconsider their past and their evaluation of historicity today.

Further building on this idea of critiquing how the general public remembers the history of Japan's imperial past, Kunimoto analyzes the multimedia, site-specific installations created by Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. Ho examines the Japanese occupation of Singapore, and through altered digital media, calls attention to the deceiving façade shaped by Japanese propaganda and postwar films that hide the true nature of fascism underneath. In *Hotel Aporia* (2019), Ho splices clips from the influential filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu and Ryuichi Yokoyama's cartoon propaganda film *Fuku-chan's Submarine* (1944). Kunimoto argues that by removing or de-animating the faces of all the characters appearing in the original film, Ho effectively revokes the originally intended nationalistic sentiment of these public media forms. With this hollowness, Ho ruptures the neutralizing narrative espoused by the media to allow present-day viewers to question how past propaganda effectively masked and promoted Japanese imperialism, and how this is similarly done today with the utilization of big data in the digital world to promote aspirational fascism.

Traversing the transpacific, Kunimoto draws inspiration from her own personal history to shine a light on the historically understudied subject of Japanese Canadian incarceration during World War II and the resulting transnational history of settler colonial capitalism. Kunimoto skillfully weaves an analysis of three Japanese Canadian artists who engage with the community to animate the origin of anti-Asian hate and exploitation in British Columbia, and its continued prevalence today. Examining the works of Cindy Mochizuki, Kellen Hatanaka, and Henry Tsang,

Kunimoto argues that their artworks serve as redressive acts, relying upon participation from the Japanese Canadian community through oral histories to investigate how global capitalism exploits social and class struggle through the use of the Asian body for labor. By animating their research on local histories through multimedia installations, a video walking tour, and more, these artists reveal the complexities of Japanese colonialism across the Pacific Ocean.

To conclude her study, Kunimoto summarizes her imperial animations framework with Malaysian artist Au Sow Yee's video work *The Extreme Journey of Perwira and the Calm Sea* (2019). Similar to Ho's practice of manipulating propaganda material, Au traces the real and fictionalized media icon of Tani Yutaka/Harimao who has permeated the history of global capitalism as he shapeshifts from a Malaysia-based Japanese spy to a famed pop culture manga hero. Namiko claims Tani-turned-Harimao to be a clear representation of imperial animations. As Au unravels Tani/Harimao's transformation across time, his animated and lingering presence across historical and contemporary media links his origins in Japanese imperialism to present-day liberalism.

Imperial Animations in Transpacific Contemporary Art expands beyond the Western-dominated art historical field by including overlooked transpacific artists and practices, predominantly female artists, making it a significant contribution to contemporary art historical discourse. Kunimoto effectively articulates in-depth visual analyses, notably of rather hard-to-describe installation works, and carefully weaves in her interpretation of how each work operates as an imperial animation. Ultimately, Kunimoto urges readers to be aware of how imperialism is linked to the world of media today and encourages readers to take the time to uncover how artists are attempting to call out the trajectory of aspirational fascism and to enact change in the present.