

# ROGER SHIMOMURA MISTAKEN IDENTITY





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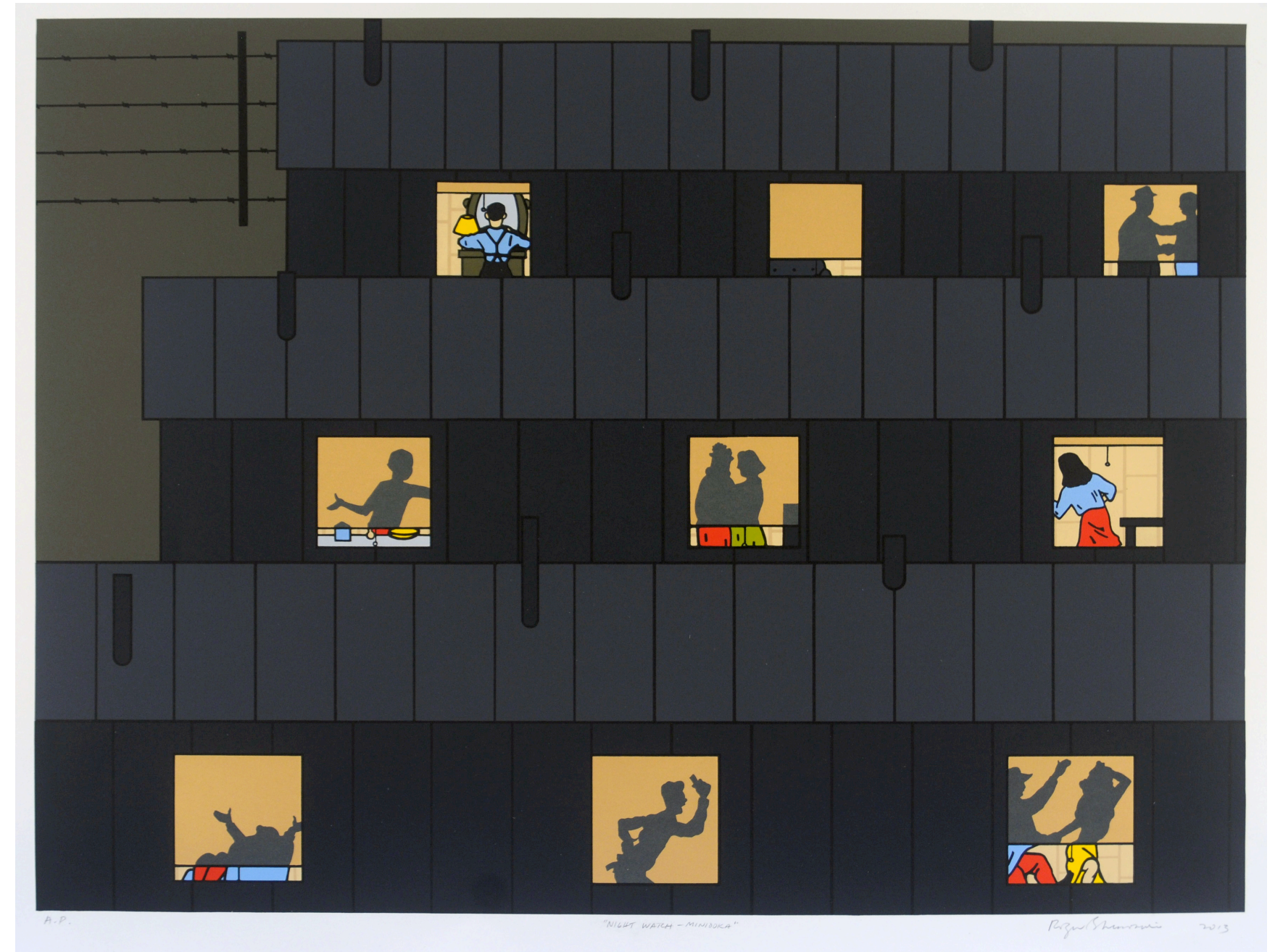
## MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Protest art, by definition, is a minority point of view. It speaks truth to power, drawing attention to social ills, advocating for change, and calling for action to right wrongs. Since protests are grounded in opposition to objectionable political structures, artists create works of dissent to let others who agree with them know they are not alone; they provide touchstones of solidarity. We look to the dynamic visual culture of protest for the evidence and historical record of objection, letting future generations know not everyone agreed with abuses of power.

Roger Shimomura's extraordinary prints about his internment camp experiences confront history, indict racism and advocate for civil liberties while exploring identity. In his work, the display of virtuoso printing dazzles the eye with flat patterns and myriad colors derived from traditional Ukiyo-e Japanese prints in mash-up with comic book sensibilities and pop art irony. The use of lithography adds to the concept, and feel, of mass-produced print culture: posters, advertising, the funny papers. Shimomura takes his autobiographical experiences—the unconstitutional forced detention of his family and tens of thousands of others—and makes us look at it hard. He's using satire run through a printing press in the best tradition of printmaking's social commentators such as Goya, Daumier, Kuniyoshi, Posada, Masereel or Catlett.

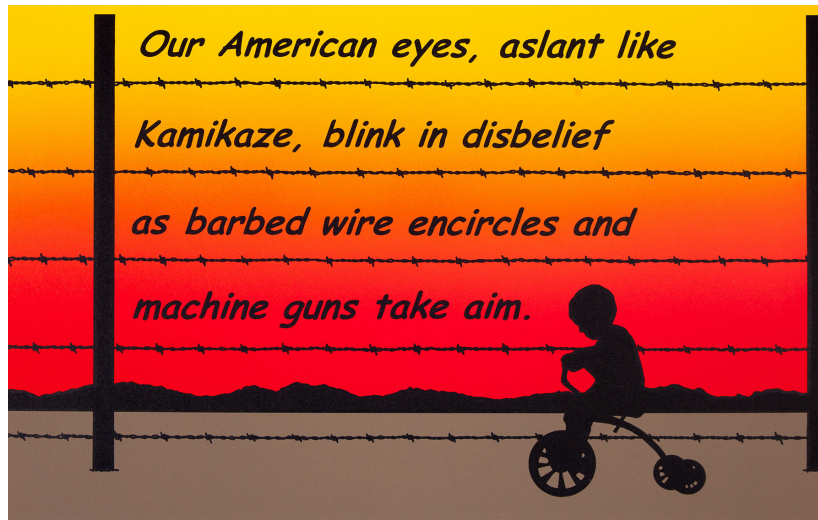
A striking recurring image in Shimomura's work is the kid on a trike, in silhouette, behind barbed wire. He stands in for the youthful Roger, imprisoned in two different camps, along with his family, as a result of racism and xenophobia. The image shows up in several lithographs: *The Camps (Nisei Trilogy)*, 2015, *Minidoka Snapshots: Exploration*, 2010, and most poignantly, in *American Guardian*, 2008. Regarding this last print, Shimomura says, "... The image itself depicts a Japanese American internment camp from the vantage point of one of the guard towers that surrounded the camp. The sentry closely observes a child riding the tricycle," a reference to the artist, who at the time of his incarceration was 4 years old.

*Night Watch—Minidoka*, 2014, at first reads like many comic book takes on a city scene after hours—people go about their business, lovers meet, couples quarrel, hints of their colorful lives stay mostly hidden behind partially drawn (significantly) yellow shades. The perspective plays tricks, however; this is not a three story high-rise in Seattle. Rather, as the eye works its way upwards it bumps into the barbed wire, and back down we go. These are three, single-story barracks-style shacks, limiting, confining, crowding, defining the lives of people forced to live here. The *Night Watch* theme, taken from the mistitled Rembrandt painting, demon-



*Night Watch—Minidoka*, 2014. 11 Color Lithograph. Edition: 52. Image: 27.75" x 38" Paper: 30.75" x 40.5"





*The Camps (Nisei Trilogy)*, 2015. Lithograph. Edition: 50. Image: 15" x 24"  
Paper: 18.5" x 27" (detail)

strates Shimomura's wit and art-historical literacy. Rembrandt recorded the portraits of a seventeenth-century Dutch company of home guard militia, called to take arms at a moment's notice. Dirt, grime and soured varnish turned a daylight scene into black night and the misinterpretation took hold. Mistaken history begets a new title and day becomes night, right becomes wrong, facts get buried, labels get affixed, while the unvarnished truth goes missing.

While Rembrandt might not have, Shimomura prompts the viewer to consider the problematics of militias and whom they label enemies. The print *American Guardian* might ask as well, "Who watches the watchmen?" a theme underlying a 1986 landmark graphic novel, *The Watchmen*, which cribbed it from the Roman author of the *Satires*, Juvenal. The shadow of a menacing U.S. soldier looms, godlike, over a camp, scanning with binoculars, machine gun at the ready. His is the all-seeing eye that



*Minidoka Snapshots: Exploration*, 2010. 5 Color Lithograph. Edition: 30.  
Image: 6.5" x 8" Paper: 9.975" x 10.75" (detail)

always judges and never sleeps. In his sights—our sights—is, absurdly, if it wasn't absolutely historically true—the tiniest, helpless little kid. Barbed wire and another watchtower barricade the far ground; there's no escaping this concentration camp no matter how hard you pedal. Further, one can infer the long view of the emotional effects of such incarceration—the lifelong burden under the panopticon of racial profiling, stereotyping, discrimination and its traumas to self-esteem and identity.

The pop art/comic book/graphic novel style perfectly suits Shimomura's storytelling. He's giving us the underground, unauthorized, fantastical narrative the mainstream highbrow history books left out. I remember, as a child, getting a lot of information on what was wrong with society from comic books my parents didn't approve of. I saw incompetent cops in *Batman*, war-wronged G.I.s in *Blazing Combat* or the oozing id of *Swamp Thing*, along with *Mad* magazine's critique of commercialism,

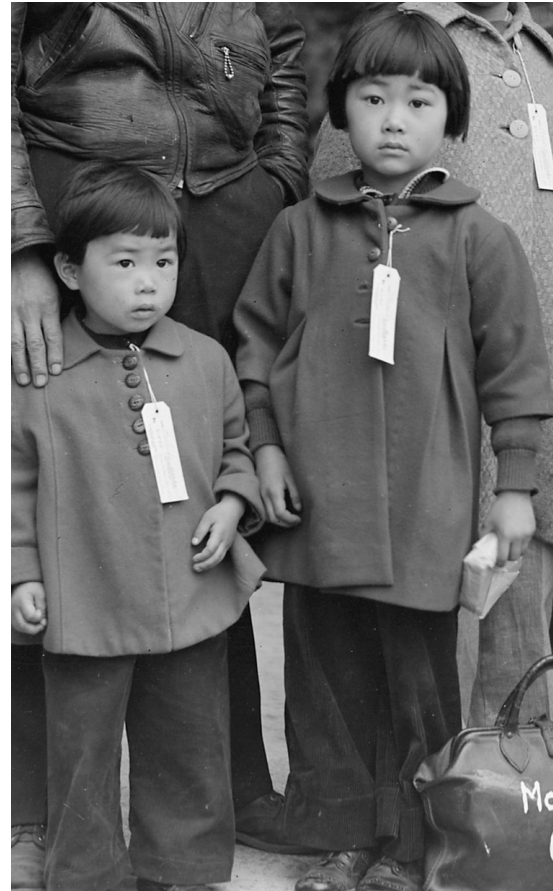


*American Guardian*, 2008. 7 Color Lithograph. Edition: 50. Roman Numeral Edition: XIV (color variant in ground ochre). Image: 27" x 39" Paper: 31.5" x 41" (approximate)





For Dorothea Lange, 2005. 5 Color Lithograph. Edition: 45. Image: 10.5" x 9" Paper: 14.5" x 12"



Dorothea Lange, *Members of the Mochida Family Awaiting Evacuation*, May 8, 1942. Black and white photograph, National Archives and Records Administration. 210-G-C153. (detail)

militarism and supposed social norms. Reading comics' alternative narratives, imagining parallel universes, and recoiling at the weird true tales lets one think the unthinkable and gives permission to question authority. Roger Shimomura's prints shrink you down, send you back in time, put you on the tiny trike against guys with real guns—your own guys—and make you imagine that monumental injustice for what it really was. It's quite a feat! And, unlike the decontextualized, cool outtakes from the funnies pop artist Roy Lichtenstein employs, mainly for their looks, Shimomura's pop surrealism burns hot. He's another member of the Justice League—or should be—righting wrongs, bearing witness, sending up stereotypes. No wonder he occasionally depicts himself as a superhero. From the perspective of Karen Lucas, of the Twin Cities Japanese American Citizens League, however, "I think he is depicting the superhero as Shimomura. Here is Superman. How does he look when he looks like me? What if he were me? How would people react to him? Would he still be their superhero?"

As the colophon to the *Mistaken Identities* suite makes clear, this series sets forth the failure of World War II-era America, as a social and political entity, to distinguish between enemy Japanese and Japanese Americans, its own citizens. It's a problem vexing our country today, a nation of immigrants (if you're not counting Native Americans), many eager to delegitimize the rights of groups democracy promises to protect, under dubious assertions of whom is presumed 'American.' In this series, Shimomura plays with varied sources of imagery from the internment camps, from archives, family snapshots and two well-known official photographers. He reimagines these materials via a pop-style Edo-era lens. Photographers Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams were employed by the federal government, post-WPA, to document camp life and the processing of internees. Lange made it clear she thought the internment was wrong and attempted to take photos beyond the white-washing campaign the military intended. Her harrowing camp photos, deemed government property, remained impounded until 2006. A few photos, empathizing with her subjects, such as *Girl With ID Tag*, managed to get published. Shimomura quotes and remakes Lange's photo, in the lithograph *For Dorothea Lange*, retaining and reinforcing the sadness, loss and dignity of the child subject, mistaken as a threat, misidentified as a menace. The other images can be identified as fellow internees, and artists, such as Tokio Ueyama, an accomplished painter with a fine arts degree from the University of Southern California. He was dispossessed and



Super Buddahead, 2012. Color Lithograph. Edition: 40. Image: 29.5" x 10" Paper: 33.5" x 13"





*For Tokio Ueyama, 2005. 5 Color Lithograph. Edition: 45. Image: 10.5" x 9" Paper: 14.5" x 12"*



*Memories of Childhood—Page 7, 1999. Color Lithograph bound in a hand-made book. Edition: 30. Image: 7" x 10" Paper: 10" x 12" (detail)*

relocated with his wife to Amache, Colorado, where he conducted art classes for other prisoners. Another artist, Masao Mori and his wife Sada, were interned at Topaz after being forced to sell all their belongings in Oakland, continued to draw and paint in the camp. Ansel Adams photographed dignified portraits of internees at California's Manzanar War Relocation Center. Harry Hatate, founder of the New Washington Oyster Company, was incarcerated at Idaho's Minidoka Relocation Center, the same camp as Roger Shimomura. Hatate chaired the Food Distribution Committee, which managed to source and supply Japanese food such as green tea and soy sauce, to incarcerated. Green tea and soy sauce can be found in any Cub foods today, deemed "ethnic" yet unthreatening by giant commercial retailers. Hatate's photos can be found in the archives of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle. The pain and dismay of being forced to eat food-not-yours, is summed up in *Memories of Childhood—Page 7*. White bread, milk and a hotdog sit uneaten in front of a tight-mouthed woman holding her hand to her face, while a pair of chopsticks lie untouched beside the plate.

The *Yellow No Same* series further explores the lumping of Asians into one generic category by American society at large, while fixing Asian Americans into that same category. Assimilation isn't possible when discrimination marks you as "other," while the failure to assimilate has been held against each successive wave of immigrant groups as grounds to discriminate against them. Using the pictorial language of Ukiyo-e, traditional Japanese woodblock prints, Shimomura applies memes of cultural identity to critiques of American stereotyping and racism. Japanese Americans, U.S. citizens, are depicted contained inside and behind lines of barbed wire while unincarcerated, colorfully robed figures from 19th-

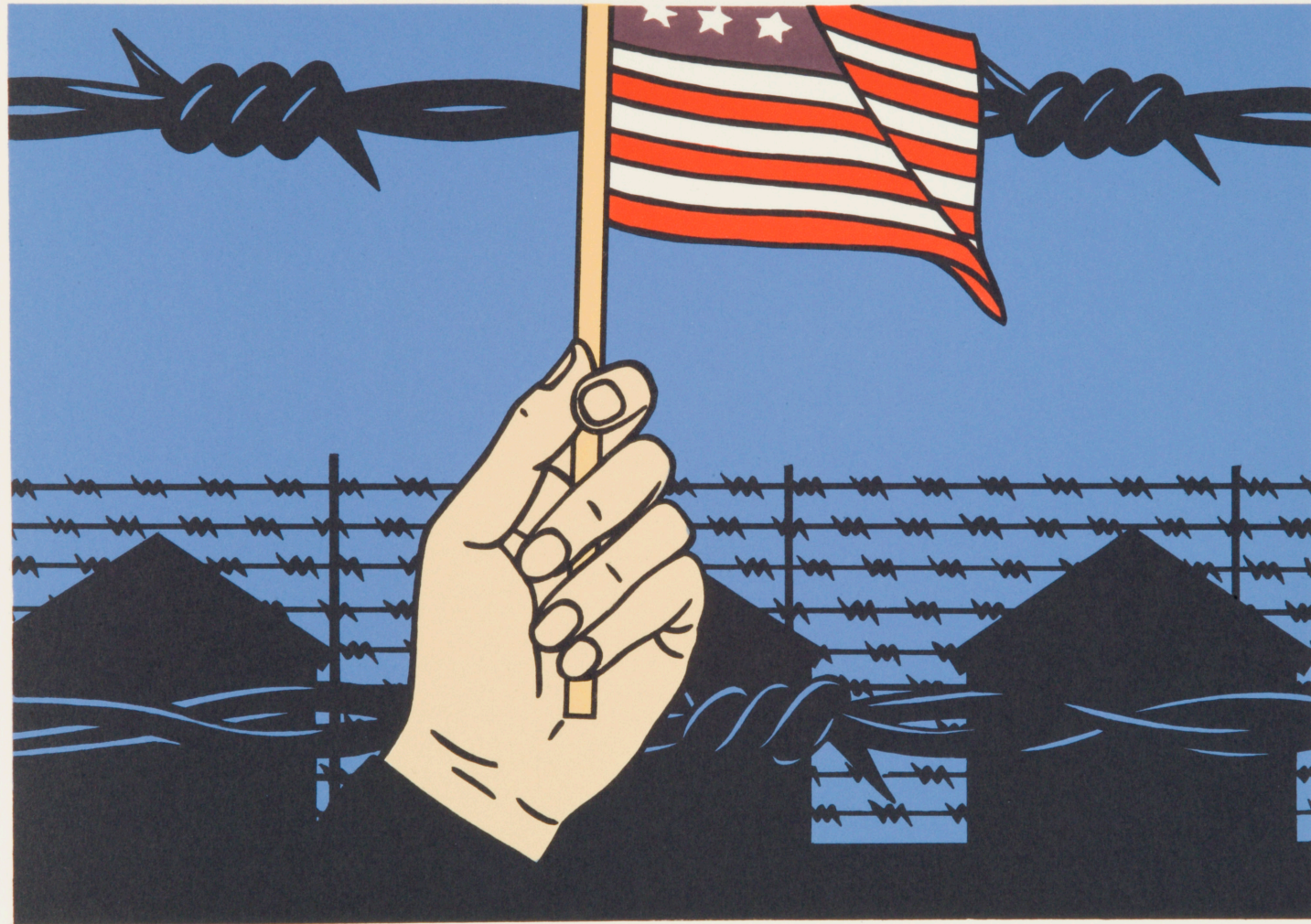


*Yellow No Same #8, 1992. 10 Color Lithograph. Edition: 45. Image: 3.5" x 8" Paper: 5.5" x 10"*

century actors and samurai prints exist outside. Outside, on this 'other' side of that metaphoric fence, the fine artistic beauty and skill seen in valuable antique Japanese prints is recognized by any cultured American, while contributions of American Japanese do not win them respect. A member of the distinguished 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the segregated unit of Japanese American WWII volunteers, seen in uniform in *Yellow No Same #4*, would confront a sword wielding samurai if he were not detained, while a graduate in a mortar board cap, *Yellow No Same #8*, is still held captive. Many of the incarcerated were highly educated and took pains to establish grade schools and high schools inside

the camps for their children. Even Mickey Mouse is behind the razor wire in *Yellow No Same #9*, neither childhood innocence nor assimilation will protect you from pervasive prejudice. Talking about then, of course, Shimomura is also discussing now. Responding to *Yellow No Same #9*, Karen Lucas provides a deeper insight into this imagery, stating, "That Mickey Mouse was an Asian American Mickey Mouse. He belonged to a Japanese American child. He belongs behind barbed wire as much as the child. I bring my culture with me. I bring my language with me. I bring my cultural ideals and collective history with me when imprisoned. My cultural ideals are American. My language is American. My history is





*Memories of Childhood – I was sad when my uncle Mich left camp to join the war, 1999. Color Lithograph bound in a handmade book. Edition: 30. Image: 7" x 10" Paper: 10" x 12"*

American history. Those were all imprisoned with me. I claim Mickey, he belongs with me in prison. Just like saying the pledge of allegiance and saluting the flag were in prison.” Lucas stresses she was not incarcerated, but uses the collective ‘I’ as a Japanese American. American-ness, and its exclusions, is what Shimomura skewers each time he depicts icons of Americana juxtaposed with and layered upon Asian tropes.

At the time of this exhibit, the American president-elect, his supporters and members of his transition team have pandered to nationalist prejudices in calling for a database or registry of Muslims, even citing the internment of Japanese Americans as a precedent. Racists often need history lessons. In fact, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, the federal law granting reparations to Japanese Americans interned during WWII by the United States government. Acknowledging the fundamental injustice of the evacuation and relocation order, it stated detention was the result of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership,” and not security concerns. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush issued a formal apology along with the first checks to survivors.

As the name of the Minidoka National Historic Site memorial says, ‘Nidoto Nai Yoni (Let it not happen again).’

*Ruthann Godollei is the DeWitt Wallace Professor of Art at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her prints incorporate political and social commentary. Recent exhibits include Nasty Women, Knockdown Center (New York City); Democracy in America, Phoenix Gallery (New York City); Ruthann Godollei: Herd Mentality, SooVAC (Minneapolis, MN); and Politics, Persuasion, and Propaganda, Middle Tennessee State University (Murfreesboro, TN). Godollei is the author of a DIY printing book, ‘How to Create Your Own...’ (Voyageur Press) and her work is in the collections of the Polish National Museum of Art (Poznań, Poland), Kumu National Art Museum (Tallinn, Estonia), Penang State Museum (Malaysia), the Centre For Fine Print Research (Bristol, UK), the Minnesota Museum of American Art (St. Paul, MN), the Denver Museum of Art, Rutgers University (Camden, NJ), among others. At Macalester College, she teaches Printmaking and a class on Dissent.*

#### Sources

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Front cover: *Yellow No Same #5*, 1992. 10 Color Lithograph. Edition: 45. Image: 3.5" x 8" Paper: 5.5" x 10"

Back cover: *Kansas Samurai*, 2004. 7 Color Lithograph. Edition: 46. Image: 38.75" x 26" Paper: 44.75" x 31"





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January 27–March 10, 2017

**Opening Reception**

Friday, January 27, 7–9 pm

**Public Discussion**

Thursday, February 23, 7 pm

*The Law Warschaw Gallery wishes to recognize the Twin Cities Japanese American Citizens League, Roger Shimomura, Greg Kucera Gallery and The Lawrence Lithography Workshop for their support of this exhibition.*

**LAW WARSCHAW GALLERY**

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**Hours**

M/T/W/F	10 am–4 pm
TH	10 am–8 pm
S/S	noon–4 pm

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