

A Body that Lives

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ST PAUL St Galleries One and Two



As soon as you concern yourself with the 'good' and 'bad' of your fellows, you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competing with, and criticising others weaken and defeat you.¹

This year marks the seventy-third anniversary of Japan's surrender to American allied forces, which officially ended the Asia-Pacific War (WWII). While the fighting itself is long over, its national impact in Japan and America remains present via official public memorials and museums dedicated to remembering this event. Although memorial infrastructure plays an important role in recognising traumas associated with this conflict, this exhibition explores how documentary practice can allow other ways of memorialising. *A Body that Lives* acknowledges how painful histories associated with the Asia-Pacific War can be witnessed and reparatively positioned as they live on in the present. This acknowledgement occurs through a series of videos and photographs that have emerged from my relationships with four people: Japanese American war veteran Ben Kuroki, Japanese anti-war activist Mrs Kayoko Ebina, Japanese and POW war veteran Mr Teruo Murakami, Okinawan anti-war activist Mrs Michiko Uehara. Their experiences relate to the March 1945 American aerial fire-bombing of Tokyo (Mrs Ebina); being the only American of Japanese descent granted governmental permission to participate in this fire-bombing of Tokyo (Ben); the 1944 'Cowra Breakout' in Australia, where just over 1,000 Japanese POWs attempted to escape, resulting in 235 deaths (Mr Murakami); and the 82-day Battle of Okinawa (Mrs Uehara).

I connected with Ben, Mrs Ebina, Mr Murakami and Mrs Uehara via their established public speaking about their experiences—they are, to some extent, public figures within their own cities and countries. The artworks that have resulted through our relationships aim to enable a live, active and dynamic relationship with their personal Asia-Pacific War histories. Here, history is conceived as alive, plural and evolving, something to be in relationship with.

In stating this, I recognise the ethical and political problems that come from using a camera to witness historical and cultural narratives outside of my own. When developing this work, I actively questioned what constitutes an ethical documentary practice, especially one based in stories of marginalised historical experience.

In the context of lens-based documentary, ethics does not have a material quality that is visible. Rather, ethics resides in feeling one's way into images, into the relationships that they host, the connections they offer. Ethics is a practice based in actions of witnessing, which emerge from taking the care to actively watch and listen to images. I believe that there is much to be gained from listening and staying connected, even when images present another's experiences in ways that are unfamiliar.²

The artworks in *A Body that Lives* propose that there is an ethical "response-ability" to go beyond comprehension, which equates as much to looking as it does to listening.³ By doing so, opacity is valued, which is challenging as it pushes viewers to "respond to what is beyond [their visible] comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is only possible beyond recognition".⁴

Through *A Body that Lives*, viewers—and me, when I met Ben, Mrs Ebina, Mr Murakami and Mrs Uehara—are invited into a relationship where they take on an ethical responsibility based in forms of visual listening, and thereby documentary witnessing of this specific past as it informs the present. However, this listening does not produce a more profound understanding of how histories live in the present, and what they might look like; instead, connection is privileged. I am drawn to how the camera can connect us—the viewer, the four people who have shared their stories with me—as much as it asks for witnessing and hearing. This connecting camera is particularly significant in *A Body that Lives* as relationships

are not only intercultural but also intergenerational. Here, the camera is used to bring people together, breaking down cultural, spatial and temporal distances between them.⁵ Of course, there will be slippages in knowing and understanding, yet other forms of knowing also emerge, knowing that comes from being connected, however momentarily, to a person voicing their experiences. This connection cannot be rushed. To deeply engage requires work, and this is an ongoing practice of witnessing and listening—first to the artworks, then to ourselves, to what we want and expect of lens-based images and of history.

In these artworks, lens-based documentary is here akin to a way of living and experiencing an ethically charged, socio-politically aware life, a life where we actively practice coming together in order to see, hear and better acknowledge our differences as they link to the legacies of past histories, contemporary and future life. Embodying such an ethical practice resists the 'good' and 'bad' of each other, and instead opts for love, care and respect, which translates to making documentary images, as much as it does to seeing and listening to them.

— Fiona Amundsen, 2018

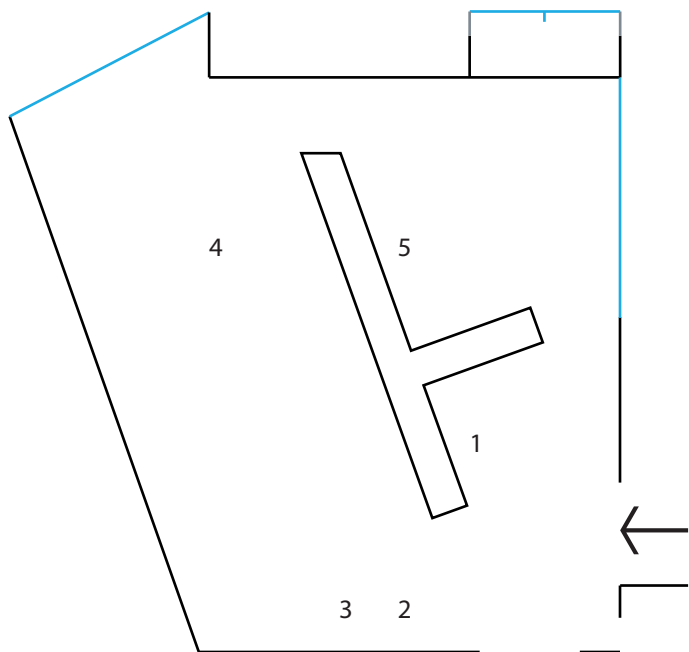
¹ Morihei Ueshiba, *The Art of Peace* (Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1992), 33.

² This idea of listening is based on indigenous filmmaker Barry Barclay's proposition: "I believe we might do well to further explore how to make the camera a listener. As a Māori, you are taught how to listen, you sit at the feet and open your ears...the knowledge is gifted to you at appropriate times and appropriate places". Barry Barclay, *Our Own Image: A Story of a Māori Filmmaker* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 17.

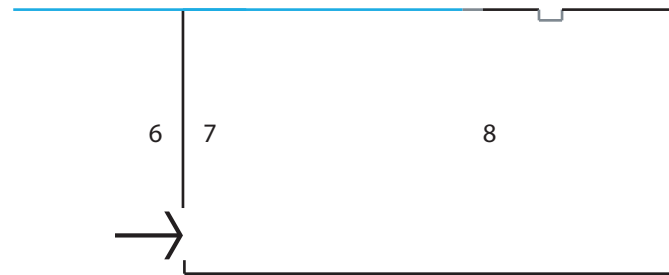
³ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7.

⁴ *ibid*, 106.

⁵ Cassandra Barnett, "Kei Roto I Te Whare/On Housing", *St Paul St Curatorial Symposium: Practice, Place, Research* (2015): 27, https://stpaulst.aut.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/14988/2015-Curatorial-Symposium-papers_ST-P-AUL-StGallery.pdf.



Gallery One



Foyer

Gallery Two

List of Works

Gallery One

- 1) *Handmade Baseball Glove at Cowra Prisoner of War Camp, 7th August 1944*, HP PVC Free Wallpaper Print, 3600 x 3300mm, 2017
- 2) *Cave Entrance on Mabuni Hill, Itoman City, Okinawa, 21/09/2014, 5.52 (quiet)*, Inkjet photograph, 1000 x 800mm, 2014
- 3) *Trees on the Cliff Tops of Mabuni Hill, Itoman City, Okinawa, 21/09/2014, 6.33 (spirit wind)*, Inkjet photograph, 1000 x 800mm, 2014
- 4) *It Was a Cave Like This*, One-channel HD video, 15mins 10sec, 2017-18
- 5) *A Body that Lives*, One-channel HD video, 15mins 10sec, 2017

Foyer

- 6) *You Helped Do This To Tokyo, Restricted United States Army Air Forces Documentation Of The Tokyo B 29 Air Raids*, Ben Kuroki Archives, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, 11/12/2013 (*blatant*), HP PVC Free Wallpaper Print, 1600 x 1500mm, 2013

Gallery Two

- 7) *Small Tree growing near Shin-Ohasi-dori, Morishita, Koto Ward, Tokyo, 06/02/2017, 7.22 (for Ebina san and 100,000 kami)*, Inkjet Photograph, 1000 x 800mm, 2017
- 8) *To Each Other/Way of Life*, One-channel HD video, 26min 54sec, 2016

Acknowledgements

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There are others who helped me when my limited Japanese failed me: special thanks to Fuyuko Akiyoshi, Nobuyoshi Maehira, Asumi Mizuo, Miwa Takamura, and Fumiko Uchiyama, some of whose voices feature in the artworks. Finally I extend heartfelt gratitude to Mrs Kayoko Ebina, Ben Kuroki, Mr Teruo Murakami, and Mrs Michiko Uehara whose experiences this exhibition primarily centres around. I am humbled by the kindness and care all of you extended to me. Also, all of you taught me ways to be relationally connected even when we did not quite understand each other. Thank you for letting me into your lives, especially as we could not know where this would take us, and the artworks that would result from our meetings. Finally, thank you, most importantly, for allowing me to honour our encounters with my camera.