

Tetsugo Hyakutake

Reflection

Unspoken truths have kept historical and social issues surrounding Japan and World War II from being confronted. I seek to pursue these “truths”- those that have not been recorded in history, those that lie hidden in people’s minds, and those embedded within me that have been formed by my own experiences. I define “truths” as being based on complex personal beliefs, identities, and relative perspectives rather than simple facts that are either black or white.

I am particularly drawn to the controversial debate concerning the responsibility of Hirohito, now called Emperor Showa, for the wartime atrocities committed by Japanese forces. The media hardly covers the topic of his leadership and responsibility during the war, which is generally considered to be taboo, despite the fact that he had full power over the Japanese military according to the imperial constitution of Japan. Hirohito authorized every single war order and was the one who decided to finally end the war. After the war ended, several military generals and politicians were labeled war criminals, and some of them were even sentenced with the death penalty as a result of the Tokyo Trials. I question whether Hirohito should also be held responsible for WWII. My approach to addressing this issue will be in the form of a video piece based on a portrait of Hirohito in military uniform. I give movement to his eyes and body, symbolizing my belief that the issue is still alive and should be debated in the context of contemporary Japanese society.

Without revisiting Hirohito’s responsibility and role in relation to the war, which has been glossed over with the passage of time and creation of a peaceful, postwar constitution, I believe that Japan cannot break free from its past. Postwar Japanese identity has mostly been shaped by recovery from defeat and economic development to catch up with the West, leaving little room for the nation’s people, especially of my generation, to reflect upon and understand what it means to be uniquely Japanese.

My works are based on historical research as well as field visits to major war grounds in Japan such as Hiroshima and Okinawa. Through video, I explore how these places have become “memorialized” as representations of “truths” that have come to be accepted in society without discourse. In each work, there is a juxtaposition of historical evidence and my personal questioning, which drives me to undertake this project. While Japan’s history and postwar development are topics that can be covered in textbooks and journalism, as a contemporary artist, I feel that the visual language of beauty and aesthetics is a unique, universal, and powerful means of communication to open up a gateway for contemplation- something that I will strive to do.