

University of Michigan
Stamps School of Art and Design

1942

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Introduction

As a Japanese-American New Mexican growing up in Albuquerque, I never fully appreciated the value of my upbringing until I began the next chapter of my life in college. New Mexico has historically been a cultural crossroads, and still is today. I grew up not knowing other Japanese-Americans, and I learned to appreciate the value in socializing with different cultural backgrounds. I found community in our individualities -- how one person can bring a completely different perspective from another because of their disparate socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. This sense of unique community allowed me to find greater value in character rather than in characteristics. My diverse social experience made me especially conscious of national policies that treat one particular social group above others. This was something that I found contradictory to my experience at Michigan: instead of finding value in diversity, so many people at our large university allow their bonds to social and cultural groups to instill competition and hostility. This, alongside polarized political tensions from our 2016 presidential election, made me highly conscious of the lack of empathy towards engaging with the Other, a dynamic I had not previously witnessed so severely.

Simply put, our world is not perfect, and as an artist I have dedicated my time at Stamps to advocate for the value in diversity, individuality, and community. Racial crimes have increased in the past four years under a president who aligns his views closely with radical

nationalistic views. This I find detrimental to our ability as a community to fight larger societal issues -- global warming, famine, overpopulation, etc. -- when we cannot acknowledge and empathize with the adversity many Americans still face. To highlight how political tensions historically have coincided with strong racial divisions, I will use my IP project to showcase the transition in identity Japanese Americans have made in our Country from problematic to model minority. I will explore American identity by observing the 1940's, a historically pivotal time in the perception of the Japanese and Japanese-Americans, through a collection of five culturally relevant garments. Denim, "the fabric of freedom," will be used as the underlying theme of the collection with Japanese textile techniques applied. The Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi that is showcased in Boro and Kintsugi techniques will symbolically represent the beauty in the diverse nature of our world. Boro stitch patterning, the textile process of uniting several pieces of fabric through hand sewing, traditionally has been used to give new life to discarded material. Kintsugi, the technique popular in Japanese culture to mend broken pottery with maki-e (a gold lacquer,) highlights the beauty in forming a new identity from a fragmented past. Each garment will apply these textile processes and aesthetics on top of denim to comment on Japanese-American identity, to contribute to a larger conversation acknowledging the identities of all Americans.

Contextual

Pew Research Center's 2010's census data indicates Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated, and fastest-growing racial group in America.(6) This is a major shift of societal perspectives over the past 80 years. This shift was dramatized during and after WWII, as the national lens moved from seeing terrorist suspects to seeing a model minority. In

1942 Japanese American citizens were forced to relocate into gated internment camps due to President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, leading to over 120,000 American citizens being stripped of their natural and legal rights. This was in part because of terrorist fears regarding the Japanese. Patricia Wakida's preface in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* highlights the severity of what these internment camps represented, but also argues that "the targets have changed, but the themes have remained constant."⁽⁷⁾ Wakida suggests that these historical events share similarities with the cultural struggles Americans face today based on ethnic and racial discrimination. Dorothea Lange, a photographer commissioned to document these internment camps by the US government, highlights the passive response exhibited by Japanese-Americans.⁽³⁾ Her work is powerful in highlighting the humanity in her subjects who have been forced into an unjust livelihood. Against the backdrop of anti-Japanese feelings after Pearl Harbor, Lange's photos shine a more humane view on American citizens forced to relocate. One photo in particular shows a group of children with their hands across their hearts, speaking the national anthem with the American flag in the background. This is quite



powerful in showcasing the absurdity behind this Executive Order, impacting children, mothers, contributing members to our society. Not only do these children look harmless, but their array highlights the individuality within this general categorization. Lange's ability to help the viewer empathize with the

Other, I will associate within my work as well. Highlighting this period for me serves as a larger commentary on how themes of race-based hatred have been cyclical throughout American history, from the transportation of slaves to the Japanese Internment Camps to the crisis we now face on the Mexican-American border.

Denim is an iconic textile symbol for American ideals. Serena Altshul views denim as “no other... personifies freedom more than denim blue jeans...what’s old is new again.”(5) Denim historically became popularized for its durability and utilitarian qualities, and was used regularly for the American working class uniforms during WWII. Adverts in the ’40s highlighted working-class grit and perseverance as American ideals, promoting symbols like Rosie the Riveter who idealized America’s middle class working persona and wore an iconic denim jumpsuit. Post-WWII it became a symbol of American political identity, and to wear denim became a popular counter-culture signifier. It was showcased by Hollywood icons like John Wayne, Marlon Brando, and James Dean, associating the material with personas of rebellion, sexual appeal, and liberation.

The Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi is complex in definition, but it aligns itself with the acceptance of and beauty in nature. It highlights how nature’s complexity cannot be seen through a lens of simplicity. Leonard Koren’s *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* carefully defines this concept by demonstrating how finding beauty within the natural state is complex because nothing can be presumed or taken for granted.(4) This is highlighted in several Japanese cultural traditions, but will be emphasized by the processes of Boro and Kintsugi.

Boro is the process of patching garments with scrap material that have been deemed unfit to wear. This is a way of prolonging the life and identity of the clothing, but also showing the



beauty of a garment's natural progression through time, highlighting the beauty in what once was and now is. Japanese fashion designer Junya Watanabe found fame through his use of Boro textiles to explore “otherness” and his own ethnic identity in America.(1) He applied this ancient Japanese technique to Western aesthetics and textiles like plaid, melding East with West. His collection is inspirational: Japanese and American, his clothing gives honor to both and highlights the similarities and beauty when they merge. My work will similarly aim to find beauty in complex identity, but I want to open a conversation of political injustices rather than focusing, like Watanabe, solely on economic success as a brand.

Kintsugi, the Japanese process of mending broken pottery with maki-e, a gold lacquer, also highlights the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic. Kintsugi mends and gives new identity to what would normally be discarded. Symbolically this will re-embrace aspects of American history that have been discarded and avoided in our recollections. Charlotte Bailey has employed this ancient Japanese technique within her art to mend pottery through textiles.(2) She wraps broken pottery pieces with her textiles and mends them with gold-bead embroidery. Her process still honors the tradition, precision, and beauty within Kintsugi, while transferring its value to a multi-media realm. I would like to push this transference further, past its established relationship with pottery,

as Bailey has done: by covering her pottery in textiles, the porcelain becomes only a structure, thus questioning its symbolic importance in contrast to the gold mending itself. I will apply Bailey's exploration further to garments, by using Kintsugi to symbolise the mending of American history.



Methodology & Creativity

While I initially set out to create garments identified with both Southeast Asian and Western aesthetics, advice from my mentors and peers convinced me that specificity would give my collection contextual clarity. The 1940s history of Japanese-Americans illustrates cyclical patterns that resonate in contemporary racial tensions, specifically around the containment of Hispanic/Latinx Americans at the Mexican-American border. My 1940s research was key to grounding my garments' historical and cultural connotations within a modern-day setting. Denim's associations with post-WWII American dominance and its utilitarian properties makes it the perfect textile as the common theme for my garments. In the '40s denim was raw, predating aesthetic textile processes today like acid washing, stretch, waxed, or colored denim. To highlight the 1940's, I used raw denim and copper nylon thread to give that retrofitted look to each garment.

Research into the stylistic choices within 40's pop culture was also key. Within a rugged utilitarian era, cowboy and workman outfits highlighted American grit. Imagery like Rosie's jumpsuit and Brando's jacket are associated with wearing denim not only with durability, but with power and rebelliousness. By applying my new aesthetic commentary onto garments that are historically iconic while representing a deeply flawed American past, I will mend and retell our history through a jumpsuit, a men's denim jacket, and a women's denim jacket, each embodying a new aesthetic truth. Rosie's jumpsuit provided inspiration through its rolled-up sleeves and ankles, wide collar, and zippered front. Levi's Type I jacket, the manufacturer's preferred jacket style of the '40s, provided the inspiration for my men's denim jacket. The Type I stood out for its functional properties, and predated the aesthetic range of the Type II jacket. Key

distinctions of the Type I jacket are the four pleats in the front and two in the back to allow for adjustment. My women's denim jacket was inspired by the cowboy bolero craze that eventually died down in the late '40s. The emphasized top stitch on the front and back yolk iterated that seminal 'western feel.' Identifying and applying the specific stylistic aspects of garment patterns to the symbolic raw denim provided the specificity I needed.



I then incorporated distinctive Japanese textile influences upon my historically inspired patterns for each garment. Utilizing Boro's process and symbolism of bringing new light to discarded fragments, I altered each pattern piece to accommodate the duality in its new identity. On top of this historical integrity and reference, I obscured each garment's patterns so that from every angle the Boro pattern could be seen. By altering every dominant pattern piece, the garments now held a duality of identity from every perspective, highlighting their alteration and retelling the American narrative of historical success. Fluidity was the theme inspiring these alterations, replicating the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic even though the process of patterning is quite

meticulous and precise. The inspiration from Wabi-Sabi aesthetics gave each garment a sense of complexity in the relationship between rigid American structure and the natural curvature of Kintsugi.



I used the Kintsugi process as a way for each garment to have unique differences, while simultaneously relating to one another under a shared aesthetic umbrella. Each piece could be generalized and marginalized with its companions, like the interned Japanese-Americans in Lange's photos, but their unity is constituted from the special uniqueness of each. The aesthetic of Kintsugi not only mends the identity of both Japanese and American textiles, but creates a thematic link of each garment with one another. This however took me through a long process to find the accurate textile methodology that could apply a technique normally used in pottery. The gold fabric highlights the delicacy found when cracks in pottery are mended together, the



delicacy of rigid to natural, thick to thin. This meant the gold fabric had to have a tight enough warp and weft to hold its structure when cut into naturally inspired forms. In the fashion world, gold lives on a delicate thread between tacky and luxurious. I took inspiration from gold silk found commonly on obis, Japanese kimono belts, to model the meticulous stylistic degree of Japanese aesthetics, elevating craftsmanship with care and purpose. This led to using a gold brocade fabric with an intricate textural design

that resembles a wave pattern. This fabric was sturdy enough to bind the patterns of raw denim and Boro stitch and its shine gave a focal point for the viewer without looking tacky.

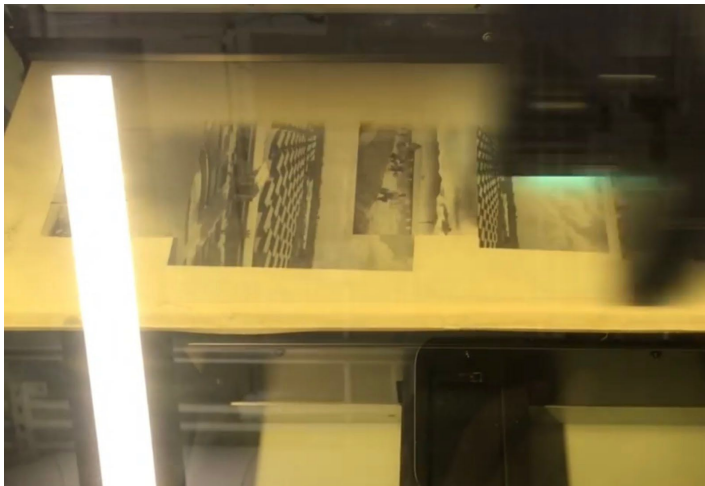
The Boro stitch was crucial to highlight the diversity within the identity of separate Japanese-American citizens subjected to the same shared internment. To show this diversity, I needed a variety of textiles. I had such a variety through scraps generously donated from Detroit Denim Co. and five pounds of scraps bought from FabScraps, a New York recycling business in the heart of the Fashion District. By using scrap fabric, I stayed true to the several-thousand-year tradition of Boro. I took these scraps and applied Japanese prints on top, elevating denim scraps into intricately patterned textiles. The American denim scraps were applied with discharge, a process of removing the top layer of a fabric's dye, of Japanese textiles, giving each scrap an identity that was integrally American and Japanese. I then sewed these scraps in each patterned piece, helping to highlight the variety and individuality within the identity of the Japanese textile.



Finally, to give direct connotations to the Japanese internment camps, without losing the macro-micro engagement of the viewer, I attached images from Lange's public access photos that documented her time at the camps. At the time, these photos were restricted property of the US government in their control over the national emergency, however, once the war had finished they became public access. It was important to uphold the visual integrity of these photos, as they convey the government's censorship and control over depiction in that era. I experimented with several textile print processes to do this. I eventually decided to UV print the photos, thereby keeping the integrity of lighting and color when printed onto fabric. I chose photos that personify the accepting, peaceable response by Japanese-Americans when forced into these camps. Out of hundreds of photos, I chose a couple dozen which highlighted the range in age, class, and professions, alongside their peaceful process within this forced migration. These

photos were finally attached to the inside of the garments, visually and physically expressing the behind-the-scenes, hidden history of 1940s America. The interior of my jackets are rugged, showing the stitch and pattern pieces and their imperfections that are hidden by the beautiful exterior. Attaching the UV prints onto the interior helps to communicate the perception of America's past versus the inhumane and hidden reality.

Each aspect of the creation of the garment



contributes to the complex altered identity I tried to create in conversing

about American vs. Japanese-American identity. The Kintsugi brocade gold fabric combines and mends both the American and Japanese textiles together, alongside giving each garment a focal point to engage the viewer. The rigidity of the American pattern and raw denim that began each garment's construction gives historical context and understanding of its relationship to the 1940's attitudes and whitewashed success. The complexity within the variety in scrap fabrics mended to one another with Boro stitch inspiration highlights the diversity of American citizens interned to these camps purely on the basis of having Japanese ancestry and blood. With the actual photos from Lange embedded on the interior, these garments alter and retell a

whitewashed past by accentuating the beauty within Japanese and American textiles and engaging the viewer in a macro-micro conversation about race politics in America.

The collection was then documented in the outskirts of the New Mexican desert to resemble the isolation Japanese Americans were put into when placed into these camps. The backdrop of the vast New Mexican desert creates the perfect ambiance to the isolation and lack of identity for Japanese Americans in the '40s. This is emphasized further through the position of my models by barbed wire fencing. The models are placed in front to emphasize how even captured, the mindframe of Japanese Americans were still optimistic through their peaceful protest of non violence. The camera is angled from below to provoke this idea of strength within the identity of the garments, looming over they stand tall even amidst the alienated environment. The documentation shows both the vastness in scenery and complexity within the garments' identity to juxtapose the incredibly complex and unnoticed past of American history.



Conclusion

1942 was my entry way into exploring how I can use the realm of textiles as a means to discuss identity politics in America. The intricacy and care I brought to each garment, similar to how an architect constructs, or an illustrator illustrates, proved to me that there is a place for textiles and fashion within art. Japanese American identity served as an exploration in how minority races have been mistreated throughout American history, myself being Japanese I felt this was a good gateway into these topics. However, being New Mexican as well, the matter of race politics around the Mexican American border is pressing and shines similar themes of prejudice with what was experienced in 1942. The medium of clothing to reference identity, historically and culturally, are themes I would like to explore within American identity politics that are current. With the political regime we are held under, the level of secrecy around the Mexican American border is quite similar to President Roosevelt's initiative within WWII. There have been essentially micro-internment camps placed across the Mexican American border, which to my dismay, have significantly been ignored by mainstream media. I would like to explore further how to use textiles as a means of identity towards how racism becomes justified and prolonged within norms of American culture. After exploring these themes in *1942*, I believe my next stop will be engaging with the discriminations found so close to home, at the Mexican American border.