

Keisho Okayama

The Spirituality of Painting and Subconscious Imagery Found Through Hardship and Struggle

Japanese Americans on the West Coast were often subject to the forces of history, and the path taken by Okayama Keisho was no exception. Accompanying his father, a Buddhist priest, he traveled to California in 1936. Just before the family was to return to Japan, however, the attack on Pearl Harbor broke out. Soon afterward, the family was sent first to the Tanforan Assembly Center in California and later to the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah. After the war, even when they returned to the West Coast, they continued to face discrimination. His father was also treated coldly by Jodo Shinshu communities in both Japan and the United States. Caught between Japan and the United States not only in terms of race and nationality but also within places of prayer that should have been a spiritual refuge, Okayama found art.

Although his style changed—from early works that resonate with the Light and Space movement that emerged in the late 1960s, to a deep engagement with Buddhist art, and later to abstract painting—art historian Fletcher Coleman points out that the spirit and ideas underlying Okayama's work consistently reflect the hardships and suffering he faced as an individual, as a family member, and as part of the Japanese American community, as well as the anger and healing that arose from them.*¹ Indeed, it is important to note that his extraction of color and form from the murals of cave temples such as Dunhuang (Red, White, Blue [1995]), and the abstract expression he ultimately arrived at through this process, can be understood as an extension of the quiet skepticism toward existence that had already appeared in his early minimalist works and figurative paintings. His avoidance of waste and his repeated reuse of materials can also be seen throughout his home and studio, where daily life and artistic production were continuous. Yet when I look at many of the abstract paintings he produced after 2010, with paint applied all the way to the edges of wrinkled canvases, I cannot help but see traces of the "Art of Gaman" practiced by those forced to live in the internment camps.*²

¹ Fletcher Coleman, *Solace in Painting: Reflecting on a Tumultuous Century* (Scala, 2025), 46–50.

² Delphine Hirasuna, *The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps 1942-1946* (Ten Speed Press, 2005).