

# cats, internment, A-bombs and 9/11

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Press Release

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The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas presents *Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani*, the most comprehensive exhibition to date of work by a Japanese American artist who created a distinctive artistic practice forged between an early artistic education in Japan, [time spent in an incarceration camp in the United States](#), and for the last few decades of his life, on the streets of New York City. The exhibition features approximately 170 works drawn from public and private collections, as well as photographs of the artist, and will include many pieces that have never been publicly displayed.

On view February 19 – June 28, 2026, the exhibition showcases paintings, drawings, and collages ranging from Mirikitani's early, traditional Japanese-style works to the complex, politically charged pieces he created during his years of homelessness.

Once largely unknown, Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani (1920–2012) gained recognition through the award-winning documentary *The Cats of Mirikitani* (2006), directed by Linda Hattendorf, as well as *Memories of Mirikitani (Mirikitani no Kioku)*, (2016), directed by Masa Yoshikawa. Born in Sacramento, California, Mirikitani spent his childhood in Hiroshima, Japan, where he trained in Nihonga, a modern painting school that sought to preserve traditional Japanese painting, before returning to the United States.

After being incarcerated at the Tule Lake [incarceration camp during World War II](#) and losing his U.S. citizenship, he later moved to New York City, where he became unhoused and transformed the sidewalks and parks into his art studio and gallery. Hattendorf, who became Mirikitani's close friend and supporter after being intrigued by his art and background, now holds the most comprehensive collection of his work.

"Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's varied aesthetics challenged artistic boundaries and established unexpected connections between seemingly disparate worlds—Japan and America, tradition and innovation, displacement and belonging," said exhibition co-curator Maki Kaneko, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Kansas. "We coined the term 'street Nihonga' to capture Mirikitani's remarkable ability to transform traditional Japanese painting techniques using materials found on New York's streets and to amplify both the vision and inventiveness he brought to his work. When I began researching his life in 2015, I did not know where the process would take me, but a decade later I am grateful to have collaborated with the Spencer Museum to bring this project—and Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's art—to a wider audience."

*Street Nihonga* presents Mirikitani as an artist, biographer, and street activist who wove his life stories into a distinctive artistic practice. Organized into six thematic sections—ranging from an exploration of Mirikitani's many cat drawings, to his memories of incarceration, to the psychological impact of both the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the 9/11/2001 attacks on New York City—the exhibition demonstrates the artist's versatility across media and subject matter.

While his charming cat drawings often served as "lures" to attract pedestrians on the streets, his politically charged works address historical and contemporary events, and the role and presence of artists during these periods of turmoil and challenge.

"Mirikitani's collaborative approach to artmaking—enlisting pedestrians as assistants and incorporating community voices into his work—has directly influenced our curatorial methodology, and his non-linear, layered storytelling became a key guiding principle for our thematic installation of 'Street Nihonga,'" exhibition co-curator Kris Ercums, Curator of Global Contemporary and Asian Art at the Spencer Museum, said. "Mirikitani's work challenges audiences to reconsider conventional narratives about identity, belonging, and the transformative power of creativity born from adversity."

Works such as *Untitled (smiling cat)* demonstrate Mirikitani's mastery of fine detail using ballpoint pens, with individual hairs and feathers drawn in a technique reminiscent of traditional Japanese kegaki (hairline drawing). His recurring depictions of the Tule Lake incarceration camp, where he was imprisoned for nearly four years, often feature the iconic Castle Rock and Mt. Shasta in the background and may reflect an evolution of his feelings about the experience. In *Untitled (Tule Lake)*, from the 1940, the beautiful and yet bleak landscape reflects the hardship of incarceration—where the 2002 work *Untitled (Cemetery, Tule Lake)*, with its sun peeking out from behind the mountain, suggests the artist may have been willing to let a little light into his memories of that period at a later stage in his life.

Mirikitani's practice became deeply collaborative and participatory during his years on the streets and those following, as he enlisted pedestrians and neighbors to provide art supplies, photograph his work, and even translate his stories into English to be incorporated directly into his pieces. His collages demonstrate his recursive creative process of copying, modifying, and reassembling, frequently using photocopies of his own works to which he would add new elements before repeating the process.

His powerful depictions of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima center on the A-Bomb Dome, featuring faceless figures seeking rescue while collaged images of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Mercy, offer salvation.

After witnessing the September 11 attacks firsthand, Mirikitani explicitly linked the event to his memories of the imagery of Hiroshima, applying the same compositions and motifs used in his Hiroshima works to depict the World Trade Center engulfed in flames—again with Kannon figures offering compassion amid the destruction.

The artist's life trajectory—and his art—was profoundly shaped by key historical events between the United States and Japan. As a second-generation Japanese American who spent his formative years in Hiroshima, he experienced transpacific travels, artistic training in 1920s and 1930s Japan, and the incarceration during World War II, which included the coerced renunciation of his U.S. citizenship. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima killed many of his childhood friends and family members. Due to his deep distrust of the U.S. government and life experiences, Mirikitani remained virtually stateless for nearly six decades, never reacknowledging his citizenship even after it was officially restored in 1959. When he lost his job as a live-in cook for a wealthy benefactor and became unhoused in the late 1980s, he transformed this precarious situation into an opportunity for prolific artistic creation and community engagement.

Mirikitani's work has previously been shown relatively on a smaller scale. At the time of the release of *The Cats of Mirikitani*, in 2006, a traveling exhibition of the artist's work premiered at the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. His work has also been included in an exhibition that traveled to the Smithsonian Institution about art from the Japanese camps in 2010. *Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani* goes beyond these shows in size and scope, enriching our understanding of this complicated figure and artist.

The exhibition is further accompanied by a catalogue featuring essays by each of the co-curators, as well as Noriko Murai, a U.S.-trained, Japan-based art historian; Yukinori Okamura, the sole curator of the Maruki Gallery for the Hiroshima Panels, arguably Japan's most well-known "A-bomb art"; and Scott Tsuchitani, a San Francisco-based Japanese American scholar-artist-activist. Additionally, Linda Hattendorf and Masa Yoshikawa worked with the co-curators to develop extensive interpretive texts for twelve highlighted works, providing additional insight into the artist. The catalogue will be broadly available in February 2026.

## **About the Spencer Museum of Art**

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The Spencer Museum of Art, located on the University of Kansas Lawrence campus, explores the intersection of art, ideas, and experiences. With a diverse collection of more than 48,000 works, the Spencer is the only museum in Kansas with contemporary and historic artwork in all mediums from cultures across six continents.

The Spencer Museum facilitates arts engagement and research through exhibitions, artist commissions and residencies, conferences, performances, lectures, children's art activities, and arts and culture festivals.

**Admission to the Spencer Museum of Art is free.**