

The Heartbreaking Life And Mesmerizing Artwork Of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani

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Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, 'untitled (mother cat and baby cat),' date unknown. Drawing, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, paper.

Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico, EL2024.163

Home.

Maybe it was all about a loss of home.

Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's (1920–2012) childhood home in Hiroshima was obliterated by a nuclear bomb. Family and friends were incinerated.

His birthplace, America, had stripped him of his citizenship and imprisoned him at the Tule Lake concentration camp during World War II. That's where he was when the bomb dropped. Mirikitani did four years at Tule Lake without reasonable suspicion or due process as an American citizen—born in Sacramento—because he had Japanese ancestry. One of about 120,000 so abused. [Countless artists among them.](#)

Later in life, stateless, never reacknowledging his citizenship even after it was officially restored in 1959, he was living on the streets in Lower Manhattan. 2001. 9/11. His home, such as it was, choked in the dust and debris of the collapsed towers.

Mirikitani's amazing life and equally amazing artwork can be seen at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas during ["Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani,"](#) the most comprehensive exhibition to date of his mesmerizing, multifaced, work. "Street Nihonga" is an invention of the museum's curators, a combination of his early artistic training in Japan and the last few decades of his life spent making art on the streets of New York City.

"His early paintings, as well as images appearing in photographs, clearly indicate his solid foundation in this painting tradition, as seen in his confident brushstrokes, effective use of ink washes and pigments, and his renderings of cats, Buddhist deities, and bird-and-flower motifs—all subjects commonly associated with Nihonga and East Asian painting," exhibition co-curator Maki Kaneko, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Kansas, shared with me in an email interview.

Nihonga developed in the late 19th century as a form of Japanese painting seeking to both preserve and modernize Japanese and East Asian painting traditions in the age of Westernization. Mirikitani's delightful cats possess the precise lines and playful attitudes beloved by audiences of Japanese painting and drawing worldwide. 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).

On the streets of New York, it was often his cat paintings that would lure in passersby for deeper artistic conversations about atomic weapons, false imprisonment, and the global war on terror.

"Although Mirikitani lived and worked on the streets of New York, his art remained deeply rooted in the Nihonga tradition. Rather than abandoning that training, he adapted it to the conditions around him," Kaneko explained. "Using salvaged materials—ballpoint pens, crayons, scrap paper, posters, and pieces of wood—he recreated many of the techniques, motifs, and compositional strategies of Nihonga. His detailed cat drawings, for example, echo the fine brush techniques of Japanese painting. In this sense, his 'sidewalk time' was not a break from Nihonga, but a reinvention of it, shaped by the materials, communities, and realities of street life in Lower Manhattan."

His practice became deeply collaborative and participatory during his years on the streets 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.

One of those neighbors was Linda Hattendorf.

Linda Hattendorf

Once nearly anonymous, Mirikitani 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. Hattendorf met the artist on a cold January day in 2001. He was making art on a street corner in her SoHo neighborhood. The two got to talking, although Mirikitani's English wasn't great.

Hattendorf became Mirikitani's closest friend, advocate, and supporter. She holds the most comprehensive collection of his work. It was through Hattendorf's documentary that Kaneko became aware of his work, and she visited the collection many times during preparation for the exhibition.

"The more I researched Mirikitani's art, the more convinced I became of its significance," she said. "His work not only illuminates overlooked histories—particularly the experiences of a second-generation Japanese American who grew up and trained as a painter in Japan—but also demonstrates a unique way of narrating those histories. By combining Japanese painting traditions with street materials and by collaborating with pedestrians and friends, Mirikitani developed a hybrid and multifaceted artistic practice. In many ways, this form of art speaks powerfully to experiences of war, displacement, survival, and everyday life—especially those of people who found themselves between nations and empires, and whose voices have often been obscured in dominant historical narratives."

Nearly 150 of Mirikitani's artworks drawn from public and private collections, as well as photographs of the artist and many pieces that have never been publicly displayed, are on view through June 28, 2026, in "Street Nihonga."

Hiroshima, Tule Lake, 9/11



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, 'untitled (World Trade Center, peace),' after 2001. Drawing, collage, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, photography, paper.

Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico, EL2024.102

Mirikitani's life was shaped by events critical to world history endlessly researched and written about. He's a reminder that these events didn't just happen, they happened to people. Individuals, not mere statistics. The suffering was felt, not imagined or merely read about.

The artist viewed Hiroshima, the Japanese American concentration camps, and 9/11 as connected, and not merely because his life served as a throughline for them.

“When he witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center from the streets of Lower Manhattan, the images of fire, destruction, and suffering evoked those earlier memories of Hiroshima,” Kaneko explained.

Many of his works depicting 9/11 and Hiroshima include figures of Kannon, the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, appearing above scenes of destruction often alongside references to casualty figures.

“In his artworks, the two events often appear visually linked, suggesting that he saw them as different moments within a shared history of catastrophic violence and human loss,” Kaneko continued. “Especially in his collages, the atomic bombing, 9/11, the Iraq War, and events of the Asia-Pacific War (such as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the incarceration of Japanese Americans), among others, often appear side by side. Their juxtaposition points to deeper structures of racism, imperial conflict, and political entanglement that underlie these seemingly separate events. For viewers, this juxtaposition can be puzzling and even unsettling. I believe our task as viewers is to continue reflecting on what these seemingly contradictory elements might reveal when they appear together.”

According to Hattendorf, who was interviewed by the Spencer Museum of Art for an exhibition preview, “(Mirikitani) was on a mission to educate Americans about our own history by creating images he wasn’t seeing in mainstream media.”

Our own history as Americans.

Mirikitani, remember, was an American. His history is American history whether the country wants to acknowledge this truth or not. How American history shaped his life, his experiences with American history, are not the flag-waving sort.

American history happened to Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani; he didn’t read about it in textbooks or see it in movies. Textbooks approved by the government. Movies produced by corporations.

Mirikitani’s artwork, like all artwork, shares the people’s history.

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