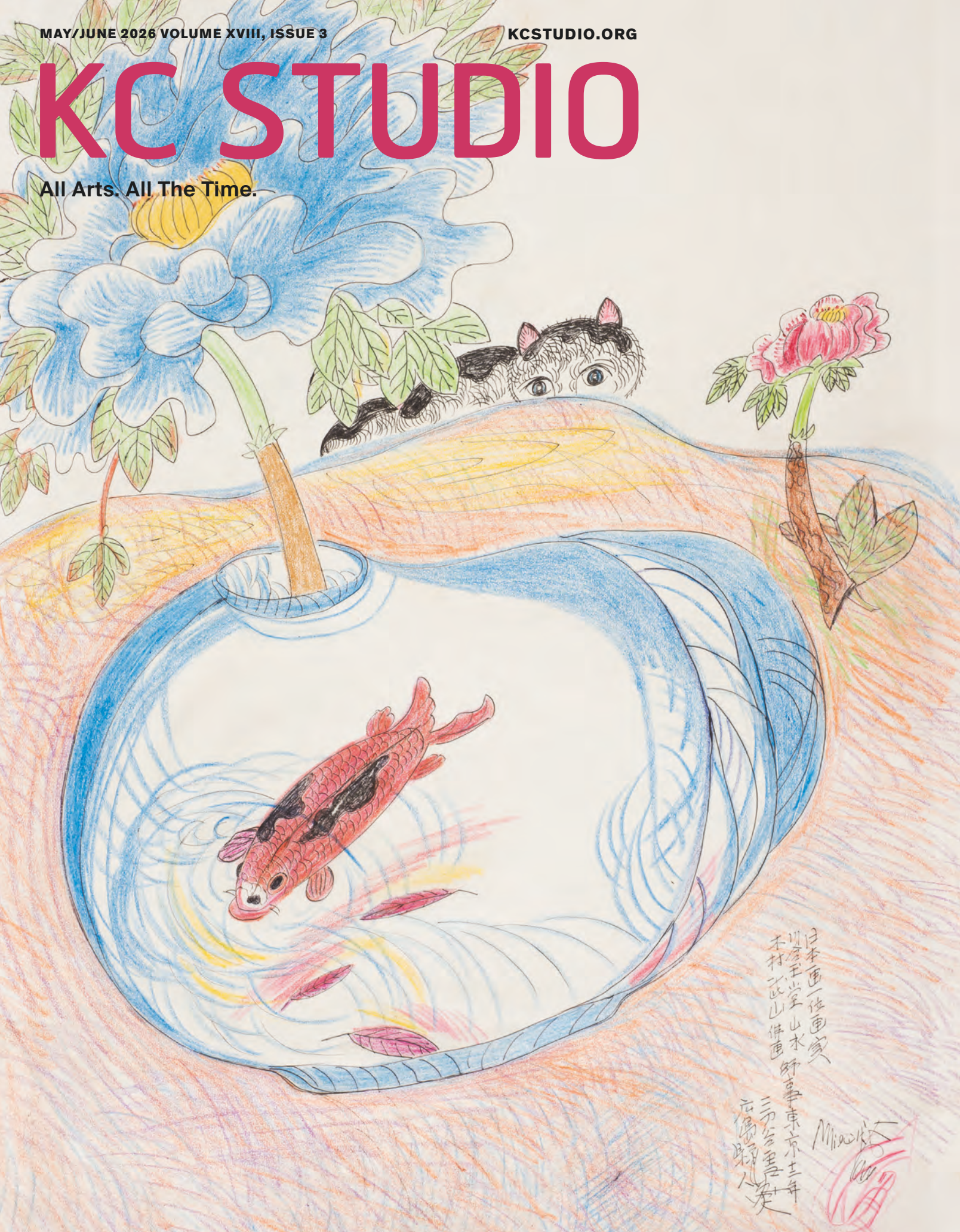


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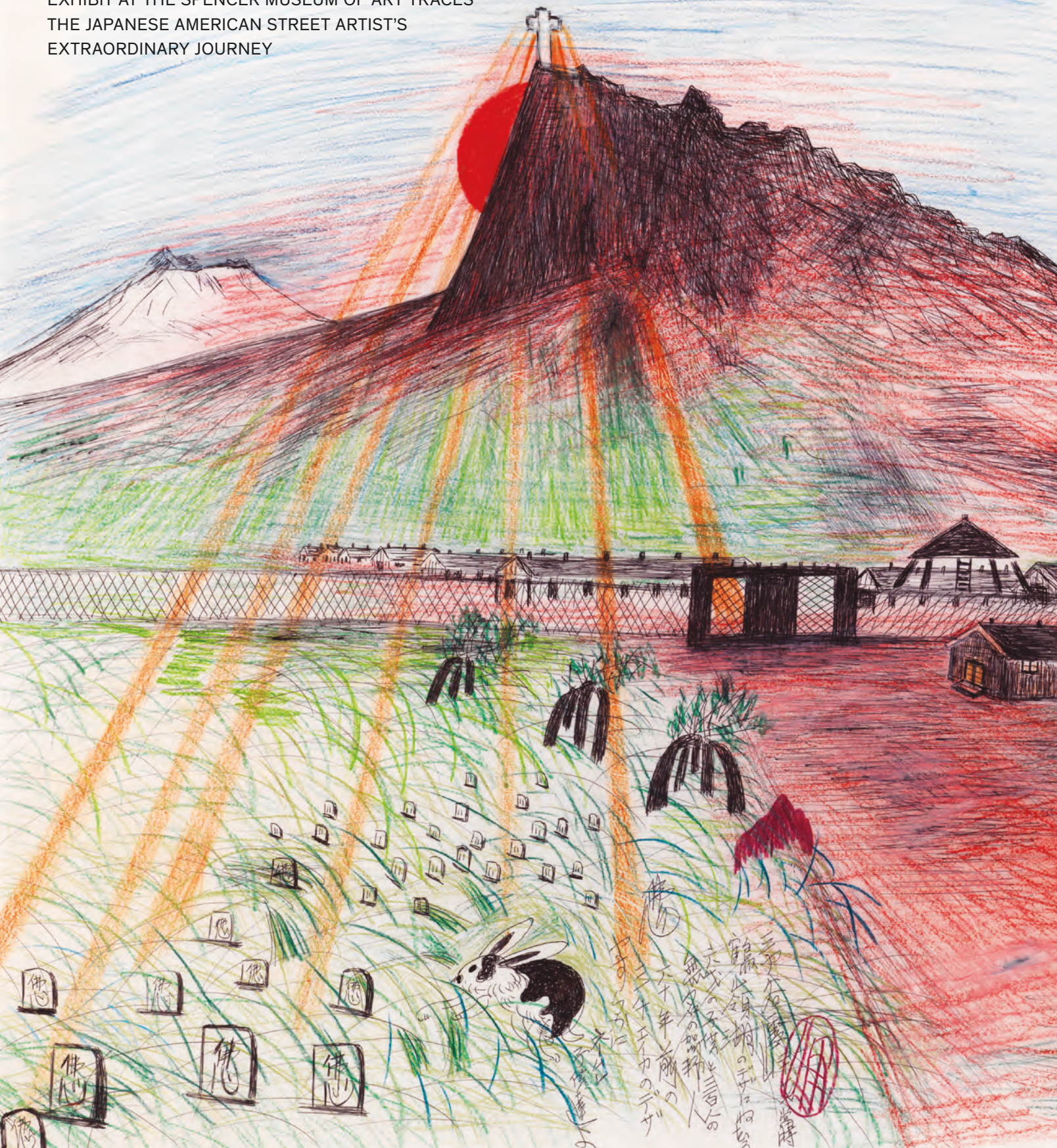
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'Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani'

EXHIBIT AT THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART TRACES
THE JAPANESE AMERICAN STREET ARTIST'S
EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY





BY GRACE SUH

As the Spencer Museum's spring exhibit, "Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani," unfolds over numerous galleries, visitors are guided along a journey of astonishing twists and turns.

Mirikitani's life spanned two continents, major wartime atrocities and decades of stateless wandering and homelessness. Despite these impediments, Mirikitani persisted in an art practice of extraordinary fluency, resourcefulness, versatility and expressiveness.

The 170 works on view, many never before displayed, range from the 1940s to the 2010s. They follow Mirikitani's evolution from his formal education in traditional Japanese Nihonga to a late period of deeply personal and politically charged mixed-media collages.

Born in Sacramento, California, in 1920, Mirikitani returned to Japan with his family as a small child and grew up in Hiroshima. His drawing talent was encouraged. He received private lessons with Kawai Gyokudō and Kimura Buzan, masters of Nihonga and Buddhist art traditions, and attended art school in Tokyo.

Fleeing Japan's growing right-wing nationalism and militarism, Mirikitani returned to the United States in 1939, living with his older sister Kazuko in Seattle. The interlude was short-lived. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. In February, FDR's Executive Order 9066 authorized the forcible removal and incarceration of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry. Two-thirds of these, like Jimmy Mirikitani, were American citizens.

Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, *untitled (Tule Lake: cemetery)* (2002), drawing, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, paper

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, MUSEUM PURCHASE MADE POSSIBLE BY THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY, 2008.32.2, EL2026.001

Still, he made art. His implements of choice became ballpoint pen and colored pencils, for their water resistance. He drew on sheets of paper, plastic, foam, scraps of wood — whatever he could salvage. At night he slept under a corner store awning or on subway grates for warmth. By day he sold drawings to passersby.

Even on the sidewalks of Manhattan, his childhood in Hiroshima and grounding in the nature motifs and techniques of Nihonga were reflected in his signature subjects: cats, koi ponds, peonies, birds, dragons, trees. Strong ballpoint marks might be mistaken for ink strokes, while colored pencil gradients recall pigment washes.

Mirikitani also often called upon other memories, both seen and unseen, with a frequency that indicate their continuing hold on his consciousness. He made many drawings of Tule Lake: the distinctive wedge of Castle Rock, the rhythmic rows of barracks, the loops of barbed wire. Another theme often revisited was the bombing of Hiroshima, usually depicted as rolling balls of flame erupting from the distinctive empty shell of the Genbaku Dome (now part of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park). The development and iterations of this personal glossary of symbols is nicely indicated in the breadth of materials gathered for this show.

Over the years Mirikitani became a fixture among neighborhood locals, some of whom recognized the formal training evinced by his elegant line work and composition. Some collected his works, including Linda Hattendorf, a documentary film editor who lived near the store that was Mirikitani's base.

Living as he did on the streets of Soho, just blocks north of the World Trade Center, on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Mirikitani was plunged once again into the catastrophic epicenter of history. In the immediate aftermath, as acrid smoke darkened the air of downtown, Hattendorf did an incredible thing: She offered Mirikitani shelter in her home. Over time, she learned the amazing details of his history and then began to help Mirikitani locate family members and otherwise piece together the life that had been shattered so long ago.



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, *untitled (Atomic Bomb Dome with cross)*, date unknown, drawing, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, paper

山本川合玉堂
日本画一帖
明身東京
十二月
東京上野美
術館
三ノ石
雪村
M



COLLECTION OF LINDA HATTENDORF, TAOS, NEW MEXICO

Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, *untitled (Mirikitani age 91)*, (2011), collage, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, photography, photocopy, paper

Hattendorf's resulting prize-winning documentary, *The Cats of Mirikitani*, caught the attention of KU associate professor of Japanese art Maki Kaneko, and eventually led to the exhibition now on display.

In a fascinating local footnote, Mirikitani's first connection to KU came about when longtime Distinguished (now Emeritus) KU Art Professor Roger Shimomura discovered his work while researching art from and of the internment camps. On trips to New York, Shimomura found and befriended Mirikitani, taking him art

supplies and food. After he was taken in by Hattendorf after 9/11, Mirikitani requested that she send his artworks to Shimomura for safekeeping.

In an astonishing further coincidence, when Mirikitani's sister Kazuko was located and the siblings reunited, it was discovered that Kazuko's son and Shimomura had been schoolmates. (Shimomura and his family had also been interned at Camp Minidoka.) Shimomura went on to curate Mirikitani's first one-man exhibition, at Seattle's Wing Luke Museum devoted to Asian American art, and

to help facilitate the acquisition of his works by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The works in the final gallery of the exhibition were created in the last decade of Mirikitani's life. Though now provided with housing and art supplies, Mirikitani continued to work with any available materials, often cutting media materials and gluing them in complex, dense, juxtaposed collages that also incorporated photocopied cutouts, drawings and hand-calligraphed inscriptions. These collages allude not only to Mirikitani's

Over the years Mirikitani became a fixture among (Soho) neighborhood locals, some of whom recognized the formal training evinced by his elegant line work and composition.

personal history, influences, loyalties, family and contemporaries, but to public figures, current events and historic moments. There are recurring American and Japanese symbols, such as the flags of both countries. And there are frequent images of Jackson Pollock (whom Mirikitani knew in Montauk in the 1950s, shortly before Pollock's death), as well as of renowned Japanese and Japanese American artists like Roger Shimomura, Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Kampo Harada. Alongside these, Mirikitani frequently places photos and headlines of himself, in essence positioning himself among artistic peers and movements.

Taken together, the collages create a composite self-portrait, testimony to Mirikitani's fierce, lifelong insistence on independence, truth-telling, artmaking and the right to define oneself. □

"Street Nihonga" was co-curated by KU associate professor of Japanese art Maki Kaneko and Spencer curator of global contemporary and Asian art Kris Ercums. Kaneko and Ercums have also authored the most comprehensive catalog to date of Mirikitani's work, available in the Spencer Museum store. An exemplary virtual exhibit by Maki Kaneko, Kris Ercums, Daisuke Murata and Ryan Waggoner offers valuable expansion of the in-person experience.

"Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani" continues at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi St., Lawrence, through June 28. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. For more information, 785.864.4710 or spencerart@ku.edu.



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, *untitled (white tiger cat with blue eyes, bamboo)*, date unknown, drawing, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, crayon, paper, newsprint

COLLECTION OF LINDA HATTENDORF, TAOS, NEW MEXICO