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Under the Guard Tower:

The Watercolors of Chikaji Kawakami



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled (The Guard Tower)*, 1944, watercolor on paper.

By Alyssa Bardge

"There is a deep and abiding devotion to nature; Kawakami allows the seasons to inform how he expresses the passage of time and project the complex, and at times, desolate emotional landscapes that the camps imbued."

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Under the Guard Tower, on view at the CCA Campus Gallery April 1–May 15, 2026, features the pioneering work of Chikaji Kawakami, a watercolor artist who was incarcerated at Topaz, Utah, during WWII. The exhibition also displays four artworks by Chiura Obata, “a prominent Japanese American artist and educator who founded and developed the art schools at Tanforan and at Topaz, where Kawakami and other artists of Japanese descent taught,” as stated in the exhibition description. Organized by the CCA Exhibitions department and faculty members Dr. Lydia Nakashima Degarrod and Taro Hattori, a symposium presented in conjunction with the exhibition gave light to several floating uncertainties and transformed them into inspiration.

The symposium began with opening remarks delivered by Director of Exhibitions and Public Programming, Jaime Austin, and Critical Studies faculty, Dr. Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, who expressed their gratitude and excitement for the exhibition and the evening’s presentations. In Degarrod’s land acknowledgment, she noted that we bring “fragile materials into memory” and “making is never separate from the land.” With that note to meditate on, Nobuku Fukatsu, a Los Angeles-based Japanese biwa instrumentalist and vocalist, opened with a striking performance that was tonally rich and stirring.

Each string plucked, knocked, and reverberated as Fukatsu sang lyrics just as resonant. Her practice includes performing on instruments that have deep historical significance, sustaining memory through sound. The biwa she performed on was abandoned when its owner was forcibly interned, left behind in a home that was later vandalized. When the owner returned years later, the instrument had survived intact. Somehow, the biwa became a silent witness, representing stories, names, songs, fears, dreams, and hopes.

Gaman (to endure)

*Stories unfolding,
hidden feelings burst like flames*

物語を語るたび押し込めた想いが炎のように吹き出だす

*We tried so hard to forget,
but now we re-live the pain*
忘れようとしたでも痛みは今もここに

According to the exhibition description, “[a]fter the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were imprisoned in 10 camps within the U.S.” After Fukatsu’s performance, Diane Kawakami Coward, granddaughter of Chikaji Kawakami, went on to tell the story of how she came about uncovering her grandfather’s watercolor paintings. She said they were preserved in a box under a bed found while moving between homes. Coward shared that she never met her grandfather but heard countless stories about him from her father. The audience learned that Chikaji Kawakami was “a bit of a hippie, an artist and musician,” according to these tales. Kawakami was classically trained in watercolor painting in Japan before coming to the United States. While imprisoned at the Topaz incarceration camp in Utah during WWII, he began painting and documenting his life. One of the most striking paintings is a self-portrait of him holding a biwa. Returning to the idea of the biwa as witness, the portrait of the artist cradling the instrument could be seen as an act of defiance, amplified by his assertion of subjectivity, since the United States military acknowledged no traces of Japanese identity in the camps.



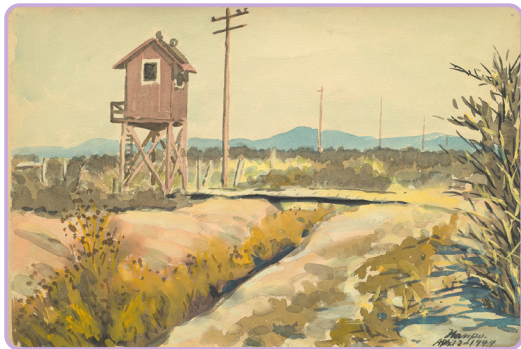
Chikaji Kawakami, *Self Portrait*, n.d., watercolor on paper.

A panel discussion between artists and museum professionals Corey Madden, TT Takemoto, Masako Takahashi, and Diana Kawakami Coward, moderated by Dr. Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, then covered themes of surveillance, reparation, and representation within the exhibited artworks and their respective practices. Corey Madden, Executive Director of Monterey Museum of Art, was a key participant in archiving and preserving Kawakami's watercolors. She expressed the apparent tension between institutional acquisition and stewardship. Madden recognizes the history behind the institution of museums and their reputation for acquiring artworks, artifacts, and cultural touchstones. Coward emphasized that, "it's important for people to see these things [because] it provides an objective look."



Chikaji Kawakami, *The View from the Clubhouse (detail)*, 1942, watercolor on paper.

In Chikaji Kawakami's watercolor paintings, we see that he painted from his point of view, documenting everyday life for himself and other imprisoned Japanese Americans. There is a deep and abiding devotion to nature; Kawakami allows the seasons to inform how he expresses the passage of time and project the complex, and at times, desolate emotional landscapes that the camps imbued. Nature's presence in his watercolors acts as a counterpoint to the unnatural conditions



Chikaji Kawakami, *Untitled (The Guard Tower)*, 1944, watercolor on paper.

the internment camps maintained. That counterpoint provided in Kawakami's depictions of the guard towers offers insight into how intensely Japanese Americans were surveilled while imprisoned in the camps.

Masako Takahashi, a visual artist born in Topaz, where her family was incarcerated during WWII, discussed her artistic practice, which questions identity, racism, and displacement by embroidering strands of hair into passed-down black kimonos. The kimonos are displayed closely together, visually representing familial lineage. She noted that, over time, as her hair has started to turn silver, it has served as a record of time and heritage.

Takahashi also recounted her work memorializing the murder of James Hatsuakai Wakasa, a man imprisoned at Topaz who was shot and killed by a guard while walking his dog. According to a pamphlet provided by the Wakasa Memorial Committee, which Takahashi advises, "[a] large stone memorial erected by [Wakasa's] friends to mark the spot where he was killed was ordered destroyed by the government to erase memories of the killing. In defiance, the inmates did not destroy the monument... they buried it—leaving an inconspicuous amount exposed to be discovered by future generations." Masako further contextualized the discovery of the stone, advocating for "proper stewardship" and "proper storytelling."

TT Takemoto, a queer Japanese American artist and scholar, presented their film, *Warning Shot*, which explores Wakasa's life up until imprisonment and his wrongful murder in Topaz. Takemoto described their film as a non-linear, historical documentary told through a "lens of witness." They expressed that there is always space and need for "queer speculation in the archive," as the film traces Wakasa's life as a server and a beloved friend and lover to his partner. The symposium provided context for the interconnected lives of the people imprisoned at Topaz, as documented in Kawakami's thoughtful and complex watercolor renderings.



Chikaji Kawakami, *In the Field*, 1942, watercolor on paper.

“Uncertain times” is an euphemism. From current unprecedented federal administrative regulations, multiple, simultaneous genocides, mass shootings, housing and food insecurities, and and and... unfortunately, there is no other way to express or soften the pressure or relieve the tension felt on all fronts. Naming the rupture and locating it is important.

During a Q&A session after the panel discussion, an audience member who is a survivor from Topaz reminded us of the current political turmoil surrounding the illegalization of birthright citizenship. She stated this plainly without flinching: “We need to tell the truth and not whitewash it.” Before the audience left to view the exhibition in full at the Campus Gallery, she left us with a quote from William Faulkner to ponder: “The past is not dead. It’s not even past.” The next actionable step is to fight back, and this starts with consulting the very people who were there.



Chikaji Kawakami, *Night in Topaz*, 1942, watercolor on paper.

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is a poet, author, printmaker, and collage artist. Alyssa uses interdisciplinary approaches to create “body texts”—experimental maps of geography, lineage, and lived experience rooted in Black feminist poetics. With critical underpinnings in Black radical traditions and aesthetics, she is committed to the principle of subjectivity, ensuring the work remains authentic to the communities that shape her. She is devoted to researching Black literary traditions, oral and written, by paying close attention to syntax, rhythm, theme, and voice. Employing collage, assemblage, and printmaking as additional modes of poetics adds a sense of tactility through visual textures and subject matter rooted in her experiences with Black womanhood and Blackness.

