

Archipelagic Memory, Community Activism and the Polyphonic Chorus: Ishikawa Mao's *The Great Photographic Scroll of the Ryūkyū* (2015-2023)

Research objectives:

My research concerns the photographic work of Ishikawa Mao (b. 1953 Ôgimi Village, Okinawa) under three theoretical concepts: *Archipelagic Memory*, as developed by Okinawan scholar Ayano Ginoza; *Community Activism*, in its decolonial context; *Polyphonic Choir* as elaborated by Jacques Rancière. All three concepts, represent a point of *Placeholding*, the ongoing debates and inconsistencies concerning Okinawa's place within Japan, as a territory annexed in 1879, and Japanized forcefully, through numerous Japanification processes. Ishikawa's photography exposes these debates and cultural tensions, adding the layer of conflict with the US military bases, which are positioned throughout Okinawa Island, and the way they cut into the civil texture through fences that demarcate the limitations of movement and settling. The concept of *Archipelagic Memory* helps in positioning Okinawa, not just as Japan's remotest and poorest prefecture, but with a new contextualization that positions the islands of the Okinawa archipelago in relation to other Pacific Island cluster, beyond national associations with the forced Japanese nationhood. I also pay attention to the women power and presence in Okinawa's culture, and the presence of community activism against US air force bases and their impact on civil life in the archipelago.

The research to be presented in Photomedia concentrates on Ishikawa's series *Fences* and *The Great Ryūkyū Photographic Scroll* (2010-) both documenting Japanese presence, American interference, and community struggles in light of this double colonialism struggle.

When Ishikawa was born, Okinawa was still under the American Military Occupation forces, a status that remained in effect until her graduation from high school, in 1972.

Methodology

This research follows the understanding of Ariella Azoulay of the photograph as a social event, in which the photographer is only part of a group endeavor, in which reconstructed scenes (based on personal memories and oral history), members of the community contribute from their knowledge and skills, in reenacting the episodes that Ishikawa had photographed. In this manner, I read the community as **a chorus**,

vocalizing the **polyphony of voices** associated with the particularities of Okinawa's history. In this staged construction, Ishikawa functions as the leader of the troupe, rather than the solo, individual artist.

Key findings

In 1973, a year after the Okinawa's Reversion (to Japan), Ishikawa participated in the Photography School with Tomatsu Shōmei, where she learned the basics of photography, with Tōmatsu's strong, vivid, direct style of documentary photography was a starting reference for Ishikawa. Her *Fences* (2010) project documented the obstacle presence of US bases scattered along the Island of Okinawa, by making the fence her ultimate icon, a signifier of the military intervention into the texture of civilian life. In the 1990s, Ishikawa moved on from the documentary style of her early projects to staged projects, including performing for the camera, creating her first collaborative project *What the Japanese Flag Means to Me* (2011) in which she had her protagonists planning the scene and location of the photographs. When approaching *The Great Ryūkyū Photographic Scrolls*, Ishikawa came ready to work with the community on full scale.

In the scrolls, members of the community serve in the role of the chorus in the Greek theatre—the group telling the story, describing others, while the actors are absent from the stage. The chorus recite their own stories, to tell the (hi)story of Okinawa. Ishikawa is part of that community, and the project is the fruit of long term encounters, dialogues, conversations, decisions and actions taken by her community to create scenes that reenact Okinawa's past and present. To use Jacques Rancière's reference in the "Distribution of the Sensible", the turn of the aesthetic into political, takes a move from the description in the printed text, to the theater that activates the words in a play, to the chorus that recites the text on stage, or for the camera.

Ishikawa's position is a complex stand between history vs. memory: while the professional historical point of view always demands the original documents to prove an action, in the past four decades this approach was challenged by the enormous respect and value given to memory. Victims only have their memories, and their ability to speak up, goes beyond shame and silencing, as they present their version of the events – from memory. Therefore, in recent decades, from the 1990s onwards, there was a huge shift in understanding the power and meaning of *testimony* (or

confessions) alongside *evidence*, and how memories and testimonies serve as powerful tool to undermine the discourse of the victors. In this light, the Ishikawa's photography became a collective form of activism: the images are charged with historical, as well as political meaning, turning the photographs into a sequence of events created as a series of staged memories, or comments conveyed by the silent majority, who are getting together to make their multiple voices heard as a chorus.

Therefore, this research serves as a roadmap for viewing Ishikawa Mao's photography, especially her *scrolls* project, remember their role and affect within the community, their place holding in the wider context of Japanese audience. The battle over the *memory* of the Asia Pacific War (and its articulation), offers an example of how placeholding by the Okinawan community highlight and remember the events of discrimination and offense, creating paths to reconciliation and restoration of their wounds and pains, while Japanese authorities chose the path of smoothing over the past, and building for the future. As this research aims to show, Ishikawa's endeavor is a move that can expose the power structure and introduce an alternative point of view as a spark of hope for Japan's Okinawa citizens.

Keywords:

Performative approaches

Common Grounds

Okinawa Japan

Archipelagic Memory

Community Activism