

## **'We'll Remember: On Yamashiro Chikako'**

by Joshua Chambers-Letson

In "Reminiscence," a 2008 photograph by Yamashiro Chikako, the artist is positioned at the center of a group of elderly people, many of them in wheelchairs. She looks forward with her lips open a crack. Her eyes do not meet the viewer, gazing at something we are not able to see. While Yamashiro seems posed, the affective states of the people around her vary: a man in a wheelchair smiles at the camera as if posing for a family candid. Another woman looks towards Yamashiro and gently touches the artist's neck with her hand. Behind the artist, grins widely and looks directly into the camera. Another image, "Virtual Inheritance" features a close-up of Yamashiro's face as the aged hands of (we might assume) the same group of people caress her face. The images were produced during a workshop in a daytime care facility for elderly people in Okinawa—where the artist was born, in Naha, in 1978. Yamashiro invited participants to tell her their stories, effecting a transfer of knowledge to the artist from the generation that survived the ongoing occupation of Okinawa by the Japanese government and US military, as well as the brutalization of the archipelago during WWII in which a third of Okinawa's civilian population was murdered or died.

Out of these workshops also emerged the film work *Your voice came out through my throat*. For the majority of the film, Yamashiro's face is framed against a white background as she tells a story. But the voice that emerges from her throat is that of an elderly man telling the story of his survival of the Battle of Saipan. The tragic events are hauntingly resonant with the stories told by Okinawan survivors of the Battle of Okinawa—death, starvation, loss. As she speaks, her mouth moves in and out of sync with his voice, his face projected across hers at points with varying degrees of alignment.

These works resonate with her seminal film, the 2008 *Seaweed Woman*. Here, the viewer seems to be seeing both water and shore from the perspective of a body floating off the coast of Okinawa—later revealed to be Yamashiro, dredged in seaweed). As in *Your Voice*, the artist's body becomes a conduit for the transmission of elided Okinawan histories and for intergenerational memory, as much as she is, in the words of curator Kondo Kenichi, "using her own body to express the way that Okinawa is tossed around at the whims of Japan and America." Throughout *Your Voice*, Yamashiro features images of an archive, drawing a direct connection between the notion of an archive as a repository of official knowledge, and the capacity of the body to perform as a living archive of submerged and minor knowledge. Nearly a decade after these works were made, it is likely that many of Yamashiro's elderly collaborators and interlocutors in these workshops are with us no longer. The survivors of some of World War Two's worst atrocities—whether committed by the US military and Japan in Okinawa, the Japanese military in Manchuria, the US military in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or even with the US governments incarceration of 120,000 Japanese American in concentration camps spread throughout the US interior—are beginning to leave us. But the things they survived have not.

The military occupation of Okinawa continues apace in 2018, as the Japanese government under the leadership of nationalist prime minister Shinzo Abe moves towards the dilution of Japan's pacific constitution (imposed by the US occupying forces after the war). In the US and Europe, racialized migrants find themselves subjects of violence, abuse, scapegoating,

and mass detention (the US is currently holding 12,800 migrant children in US detention centers throughout the nation). And the threat of war's catastrophes seem to draw ever closer. As the generation who witnessed and kept alive the memory of the past withdraw from our present, Yamashiro's work is a powerful act of refusing to forget: both those atrocities that occurred in the past and that continue to unfold in the now.

As if to say: Though you are leaving, I'll remember. I won't forget you.

We'll remember.

We'll remember.

We'll remember...