



# Taboo and ignorance in Japanese war-time history

*Yoshiko Shimada*

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**Yoshiko Shimada** (b. 1959 in Tokyo) lives and works in Chiba, Japan. Shimada received her Ph.D. from Kingstons University, London, in 2015. She explores the themes of cultural memory and the role of women in the Asia-Pacific War, as both aggressors and victims. As methods of expression, she uses printmaking, installation, video, performance, research and archiving. She also works as an art historian and archivist. Her research interests include art and politics in the post-war Japan, alternative art education, and feminism. Her works have been shown widely in exhibitions such as “Fanatic Heart”, Para Site, Hong Kong (2022-2023), “Japan Unlimited”, Museums Quartier Wien (2019), “After ‘Freedom of Expression?’”, Aichi Triennale (2019) and “Beyond Hiroshima” Tel Aviv University Art Gallery (2015). She currently lectures on feminism and art at the University of Tokyo.

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## **“A Picture to be Burnt”, 1993 etching, 60x45 cm**

I exhibited this work, “Pictures to be Burnt” (1993) at the *Non-Freedom of Expression*, an exhibition within the *Aichi Triennale* in 2019, and *Kansai non-Freedom of Expression* exhibition in Osaka in 2021. This etching work was made in response to Toyama Museum of Art’s decision to remove an artwork by Oura Nobuyuki from an exhibition in 1986 that was deemed to cast the Emperor in an unfavourable light. Furthermore, in 1993, as the right-wing campaign grew, the museum caved into public pressure, and went so far as to burn the 470 undistributed catalogues containing Oura’s work. I made an edition of ten, burned one to ashes and donated it to the Toyama Museum of Art. It was sent back with a one-line letter saying that the museum did not need it.

At Aichi Triennale, I exhibited the print, the ashes, the letter and a photo of the burning process.

Despite the clear explanation, the piece is widely perceived to be an “attack” on the Emperor. I suppose most of the right-wingers who campaigned against the exhibition had not seen it.

This piece was widely exhibited in museums and commercial galleries without incident. It even made a cover of *Asian Art News* in 1993. However, in the past 10 years, it has become increasingly difficult to show artworks related to the emperor system, comfort women and Japan’s war crimes, and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. This is clearly part of a Japanese government intervention.





### **“Being a statue of a Japanese comfort woman”**

In 2011, the “Statue of Peace” by Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung was erected in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and the Japanese government demanded its removal. I was furious at the Japanese government’s refusal even to allow such a small memorial, but more than that, I thought: “Shouldn’t there be a statue of Japanese comfort women in Japan?” At that time, I had moved to Boso, and there was a nearby shelter called “Kanita Women’s House” for women who had no place to go after prostitution became illegal in 1956. There, I learned about a woman named Suzuko Shirota, who had been a long-term resident of the House. She was a former Japanese “comfort woman” who had gone to the South Sea Islands during the war and returned to Japan, narrowly escaping death. Ms. Shirota has dictated and published her story, in which she related that although the Japanese “comfort women” were relatively privileged, it was still “hell for women”. Japanese “comfort women” have been ignored for a long time, even after the “comfort women” issue had been brought to the public’s attention. The primary reason for this silence is that many of these women were in fact “professional prostitutes”. Ms. Shirota was sold to a brothel as a child and became a “comfort woman” in order to pay off her debts quickly. She was neither forced nor did she fit the image of a “chaste virgin victim”. They were ignored because they were the “inconvenient victims” who fell into the historical revisionist argument that “comfort women are nothing but professional prostitutes”.

In January 2012, I had an exhibition in London and stayed for a few weeks. After the exhibition, I held a guerrilla performance in front of the Japanese embassy in London, with the help of two friends, to “try to become a statue of a Japanese comfort woman”. The Japanese embassy is located on a wide street leading to Piccadilly Circus, and across the street is a park. In the park, I changed into a kimono, painted my head, face, arms and legs with bronze paint, put duct tape over my mouth, and crossed the street to sit in front of the embassy on one of the two chairs I had brought with me. Since it was a bronze statue, I neither moved nor spoke. The explanation was placed on the chair next to it. The “comfort women” issue is not so well known in Europe, and most of the people on the street either ignored me or glanced at me out of sheer curiosity. A group of tourists who appeared to be Japanese looked at the flyer and brushed it aside, and for the next hour or so, the only people who spoke to us were a group of Korean students (including the third-generation Korean Japanese artist, Soni Koto, who photographed the scene).

To exist as a “foreign object” in the city, to be subjected to curiosity or the cold gazes devoid of even such feelings, to just be there in silence...