



CULTURE & EVENTS

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This fall, Ken Burns' The War brought the internment of Japanese-Americans back into America's consciousness. Painter and ceramicist Arthur Towata, who survived the camps himself, bears witness to this history with his art. Susan Caba reports

As a child, Arthur Towata was taught to observe, to listen, to hold things in his head to be discussed or questioned later, in private. "That kid knows more than you think," adults would say of the boy who was always listening.

Murmurs, whispers and the subtle undertones of conversation did not escape him. Now, more than 60 years after the U.S. government confined his family to an internment camp in California, the Japanese-American artist is expressing through his art what he saw and heard in those three years at Manzanar. In a group of ghostly paintings called the "Black Wall Series," he illuminates that dark passage in history.

Advertisement for The CityKids Foundation, featuring a logo and text about their mission to help young people positively impact their lives and communities.

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## EVENTS

**2008.03.28 - Discerning Palette: Jerry O. Wilkerson Retrospective**  
The Saint Louis University Museum of Art is pleased to present: Discerning...

**2008.05.09 - John Armleder and Olivier Mosset**  
Inaugural Main Gallery show by new curators Anthony Huberman and Laura Fried...

**2008.06.06 - Natural Phenomenon**  
In the Main Gallery, see photographer Elaine Blatt's numinous images of the...

**2008.06.16 - Cybercamps**  
At university campuses nationwide, Cybercamps Academy (ages 10-17) offers...

**2008.07.01 - 2008 MFA Thesis Exhibition**  
Works by 13 MFA students at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual...

“Black Wall” refers to the tar paper that covered the barracks at the camp. “When I first entered the camp, the black was all I saw,” says Towata, 73. He was 8 when he, his mother and his brother arrived at Manzanar. And so his large paintings all begin on a black ground, upon which his memories are incised.

Layers of what look like script in smoky blue, black and yellow jitter across the paintings, evoking both language and barbed wire. In the distance are mountains symbolized by the inverted “W” often used in Japanese calligraphy. It is as though the paintings are giving up what the wall had seen, and it is a whispered tale of secrets, shame and innocence.

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A poem, the only words in a recent exhibit of the “Black Wall Series” in Alton, summed up the dichotomy of life in the camp:  
“Manzanar/Hot/Cold/Vapor  
Rising/I could see it upon  
arrival/Some never saw  
it/Still don’t/Vapor/Life/Life

existing in this/Desolate place.”

“We were all incarcerated, all strangers—the Japanese didn’t congregate,” Towata recalls. “They were all careful not to tell too much to anyone they didn’t know. There might be a dog—snitchers, informers—among them.

“So that’s what I hear on the wall. ‘Don’t you be saying things like that, we don’t know them, they’re not in our class.’ Mumble-jumble all the time, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, different dialects. Nobody trusted anybody.”

With his tufted eyebrows, a wispy white beard and tweed jacket, Towata looks every bit the professor that he is. The burnt orange of his sweater hints subtly at his artistry. The past doesn’t seem to weigh heavily as he talks about life in the camp.

And yet the events were searing.

One painting is all black and silver, the stars scattered over the nearby mountains. Another depicts a large hanging bare bulb, its harsh light glaring down over three figures around a cooking fire. The shadowy figures are Towata's mother, uncle and aunt, discussing his father's disappearance. Because families in the camps were separated only by hanging sheets as makeshift walls, they spoke quietly, to avoid being overheard.

His father, a prominent Los Angeles landscaper, was incarcerated separately from the rest of the family—picked up by government agents, as were many prominent Japanese-American men, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A few weeks later, Towata, his younger brother and their mother were detained in Manzanar. They never again saw their father.

“My mother and my brother and I, the three of us were in this room. My mother said, ‘Your father is not coming back.’ It was an intuitive experience. We got notice he was dead six months later.”

Only years later did they learn he had been shot and killed at Fort Sill, Okla., the last of several camps in which he had been kept.

“I was trained when I was very, very young that I had to behave like the next son to take over the family,” Towata says. “My father trained me since I was three years old. My mother pretty much relied on me for many things.

“That was kind of my life when I was in the camp. I could listen to what was going on ...”

Still, he was also a child, and his mother insisted—as all mothers seem to—that he entertain himself with childlike pursuits. She told him to “go outside and find something to do.”

“I looked on the dried ground and picked up some very interesting colored rocks—I thought I had found some very precious stones, purplish, blackish, manganese. Then I found out there were creatures, scorpions, all over the place.

“I was very handy with chopsticks. I would pick up the scorpions by the tail using chopsticks. Then I ran across a big, nasty-looking, big, BIG scorpion—larger than my hand. It must have been the granddaddy of them all.”

In a large, almost joyful painting, Towata memorialized the creatures that kept him company at the camp. In a grid created by many layers of the script-like, barbed-wire lines, he has scratched the images of lizards, rats, spiders, snakes, beetles and, of course, scorpions. “These are the things I found to entertain myself. This was my world. So I entertained myself.”

When they were released, the Towatas rejoined family in Japan. A few years later, Towata—an American-born citizen—was drafted. He borrowed \$465 from an uncle for the freighter fare to the States, to report for duty at Scott Air Force Base. Afterwards, he enrolled in the first class at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, finishing with two masters degrees. He served as chairman of the department of art at Monticello College and continues to conduct workshops, as well as produce his own pottery, paintings, prints and sculptures.

For years, Towata resisted the pleas of elders to memorialize his experience in the camp. “The Japanese push aside unpleasantness and try to make the best of circumstances,” he said, explaining his reluctance. He didn’t feel he had much to add to existing memoirs. Then, in 2006, a companion persuaded him to return to Manzanar for the first time.

Placing one of his pots—organic and clearly of the earth—on the ground at Manzanar, he realized how much his experience there did influence his work.

“I thought, ‘Oh, why don’t I paint and speak through my paintings and let the writers do the writing?’”

The “Black Wall Series” will be presented at Manzanar and will travel to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles in 2008.

Very few groups want their children to grow up to be artists, Towata says, but his parents began training him in calligraphy as soon as he could hold a brush. They wanted him, he said, to be a good warrior but “more than just a good fighter.” Each day he painted 100 characters. And on New Year’s, he made a banner of a pine tree, a plum blossom and bamboo—the plum being the first bloom of spring, the bamboo being resilient and the pine needles never losing their color.

“This is a tribute to my mother and my uncle and my aunt and to my father,” he says of the paintings. “That was my upbringing.”

*Towata Fine Art Gallery, which opened its doors in 1964, is located at 206 W. Third in Alton, Ill.; for more information, call 618-462-5926 or visit [towatagallery.com](http://towatagallery.com).*

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