

## Susan Sakamoto BORO

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### Susan Sakamoto BORO

Deborah Forbes

Front Cover: *Passport to a Better Life*, 2019  
acrylic, found and family papers, graphite, 61 x 61 cm

#### Deep Ice that is Not Cold ~ Finding evidence in the strata

Ice cores, such as the ones taken at Lake Vostock, East Antarctica, are unique with their entrapped air inclusions enabling direct records of past changes in atmospheric composition. Such are Sakamoto's paintings in *Boro*, records of past changes in the lives of at least forty family members. Forty relatives computes into sixteen hundred relationships, all of which seem to live in these landscaped layers of artifact, memory, and creative action.

Looking at Sakamoto's paintings, my mind's eye goes to cross-sections of ice, photos of shrinking Greenland and Antarctica ice, the retreat of glaciers, all of which discuss time and deep change. Paradoxically, there is nothing cold about Sakamoto's work; it is warm in appearance as well as content.

Sakamoto is the matriarch of a huge family; the lives of this family are embedded in the work. In earlier *Boro* works, there is a strong landscape reference but by 2018, the obvious landscape horizontality has collapsed into densely layered fragments of family stories that shift and change from the surface of the picture plane, to deeply below it, only to rise up to the surface once again. They orient the viewer to views that are sometimes aerial, sometimes head on, occasionally even upside down.

Susan Sakamoto is an Alberta Canadian artist fascinated by the layers of life, layers of paint, layers of personal and family history, and what can be discovered by learning of their vast inter-relationships. Experiencing surfaces, taking risks, experimenting, excavating layers, and allowing a painting to unfold as it will, are parts of her process. Apparent happenstance can dictate the direction of a painting, as it can in life.

The following are thoughts stemming from looking, thinking, and feeling with the paintings, as well as many conversations and correspondences with Sakamoto.

#### Boro ~ Exquisite crafting from tatters

Imagine *boro* textiles stitched in the shadows of Japanese farmhouses, often at night by the light of one dim *andon* lantern, on the laps of farmwomen. This unselfconscious creative process has yielded hand-made articles of soulful beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Sakamoto works in a well-lit 21st century studio, unselfconsciously creating articles of soulful beauty. The ideas of *boro* live in the work. The Japanese word, *boro*, comes from the word *boroboro*, which means something tattered, ragged and worn out. The diversity of patches on any given article of clothing is a veritable encyclopedia of hand loomed cotton indigo from old Japan. In most cases, the beautiful arrangement of patches and mending *sashiko* stitches is borne of necessity and happenstance, rather than an aesthetic planned by the maker. Traditionally, Japanese women used the *boro* technique to repair clothing and other items so they could be used from generation to generation. Inspired by *boro*, Sakamoto talks of her work as one generation speaking to others – past, present and future: *"It can also speak from a time when I am no longer there."*<sup>2</sup>

The layering process Sakamoto uses in the paintings often starts with a base-layer of images, then paint, then glue, and then more images; medium, cold wax, sanding, then maybe some excavating and scraping back in time (or at least this is how it feels), more scraping, obscuring, extracting, more painting, befuddling – and repeat until done!

There are areas of deep scarring – excavations back through the derma of the painting that reveal the edges of all the previous layers. The craft of the surface is important to Sakamoto. She runs her hand over a painting and remarks, *"It feels so beautiful. I like it to be finely crafted. I think partly because of my lifelong closeness to paint, the business of it and the craft of it, craftsmanship is very important to me. I love a beautiful surface with lots of depth."*

There are areas of calligraphic drawing, often in black, that seem to reference the Japanese *kanji* characters found in some of the early Sakamoto letters and documents. These have made their way into the layers of collaged materials comprising more than 100 years of family letters, bills, receipts, lists, news clippings, and photos. Some of the tattered text bits are written in English, some in Japanese *kanji* characters. Because these are family document artifacts (abandoned in boxes, but never quite thrown out, until they found their perfect utility in the paintings) they are embedded with fingerprints, tea stains – the DNA of those in the family that have gone on before and those that are just beginning their life journeys. Sakamoto also invites drawings and collage choices made by grandchildren, without direction, into the mix. She writes, *"The way Robert Rauschenberg unapologetically uses absolutely anything in his work is inspiring."*

Sakamoto's work delves into the deeper mysteries of life. By congregating document artifacts from generations of family life (images, pay slips, letters, invitations), by allowing family members active partnerships in creation (as in

*Remembered  
Birdsong I (detail)*  
2019, house paint,  
acrylic, found  
family papers, silk  
61 x 61 cm



*Love Forever* and *Boro Kimono*), by layering and excavating the picture plane, Sakamoto touches the rich complexities of living in family. In many of the works, the picture plane itself starts to hum with a present, redolent of the past that has produced it. Sakamoto's powerful work collects the energy of families lived over generations and disperses its energy to the viewer.

#### Making and feasting

Sakamoto writes, *"I want to paint by responding to what I painted, to not have a clear idea in mind, to be free in my responses."* The shifting foci on the paintings' surfaces feels much like the rise and fall of memories that come and go in fragments without explicit narrative. For the visually inclined, these are image-memories. They congregate into densely layered grids that are reminiscent of the works of both West Coast American abstract painter, Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993 CE), and Italian painter and architect Giotto di Bondone (1267–1337 CE). Sakamoto has developed a deep relationship with the work of Richard Diebenkorn, particularly, the soft geometry and spacious palette of the *Ocean Park* paintings at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Diebenkorn writes of these works that he "just feasted" on the work of Matisse.<sup>3</sup>

Sakamoto truly 'feasts' in her looking both in the moment and in memory. In memory, it is as if she has been storing a huge and murky collection of boxes and crates of images in her metaphorical attic, from which she can retrieve bits of works and marvel again. In a recent trip to Italy and the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy, she 'feasted' on Giotto's frescoes, his palette, and the egalitarian treatment of space which he shares with Diebenkorn. This is evident in Sakamoto's balance of geometric and organic shapes. One can also see her reverence for the beauty of the surfaces and textures of old Italian walls, burnished by time.

In Sakamoto's own highly abstracted *Of Fields and Springtime*, the landscape exerts itself, but the viewer (and maker) is positioned in the air and seems to look down at earth. As in works by Diebenkorn and Giotto, the grid structure stabilizes the composition without 'bossing' the viewer into a fixed point of view. Sakamoto says, *"Rhythm is necessary, but not easy to come by. It isn't easy to define in a painting, but I suppose it's a sense of movement around the painting, and hopefully even beyond. A certain flow, I guess."*

As the eye moves with the rhythm of the paintings, there are spaces that act as resting places for the eye, that invite contemplation, juxtaposed with areas of dense activity: *"intimate details, little surprises only found when looking carefully or if you know they are there."*

Sakamoto has reflected on Diebenkorn's 10 Rules<sup>4</sup> that he kept posted in his studio, the meanings of which have revealed themselves variously, over time.

### Artist Biography

*Susan Sakamoto was raised in High River, Calgary and Medicine Hat, Alberta, and was much influenced by growing up in the paint business, which provided a great respect for the craft of painting, and conversations about the technical aspects of paint and colour. She lives and works in Medicine Hat, AB, where she has maintained an art practice in painting and encaustic for several decades. While mainly self-taught, she has undertaken workshops and courses in painting in various media, colour theory, Japanese bokashi rozome brush dying, batik, weaving and print making. She has exhibited in Alberta, BC, and Italy, in group and solo exhibitions, and her work is held in private and corporate collections in Canada, the United States, Japan and Europe, as well as Medicine Hat Regional Hospital.*

*Deborah Forbes is an artist, educator and art writer living in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Her work includes tapestry, painting, and mixed media installation, and has been shown in public galleries in Canada and the USA. Forbes has taught art education and art history at Medicine Hat College; lectured widely across Canada, and was a visiting scholar at Xiangfan University, China. Her recent publications and curation include Overandunderandoverandunder... Three Contemporary Tapestry Artists: Murray Gibson / Jane Kidd / Ann Newdigate, and contributions to the forthcoming book, Between Truth and Falsity: Liberal Education and the Art of Discernment (2020, Vernon Press).*

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Diebenkorn's Rule #1. Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion. Sakamoto's reflection: *"I love the uncertainty of not really having a plan when painting - the uncertainty of responding to what has been laid down. Certainty seldom comes, or comes and goes. Fluid. I am seldom certain, but am always learning to make better decisions. If we are certain of the outcome, we aren't going to discover anything."*

Diebenkorn's Rule #5. Don't "discover" a subject – of any kind. Sakamoto's reflection: *"I agree. With the Boro series, the idea did not come first. Most of the work came first and I recognized the common thread and put a name to it."*

*Discovering a subject, or limiting oneself to a subject, can limit exploration. I think we can realize or recognize our idea through painting. We don't need our idea first. This is where the emotional discoveries come, when the subconscious comes through just by continuing to work. Respond to what is on the piece. The conversation is what is important. Listen to what is there and respond. The quiet conversation in a painting is just as important as the loud conversation.*

*Another thing about "discovering" a subject; it's all been done before. We can only see a subject with our own eyes, speak it with our own voice. The subject itself isn't new, and thinking we are so special as to be the one who discovers a subject is insufferably full of ego. This could make for very precious (excessively refined, not valuable!) art."*

*Boro Kimono (detail), 2019*  
acrylic, found and family papers, artist printed paper  
101 x 122 cm

**Concluding ~ for now**

"The past grows gradually around one, like a placenta for dying" (John Berger, 1926 – 2017). These famously quoted, beautiful words from the British art critic, poet, novelist and painter, John Berger, seem perfectly attuned to Sakamoto's work, at this stage of her life. For one who has birthed and raised many children, placenta has been experienced as a nourishing, life-giving environment. Dying is part of living, which Sakamoto does not turn away from. *"I don't avoid difficult emotions that may come up, and certainly they may be evident in a finished painting, but overall resolution occurs with a sense of optimism. I appreciate darkly emotional pieces, like Valerie Cullen's, Fireworks, painting (acrylic on canvas, 1997) in my living room; to live with it, it must contain hope."*

- The following is Sakamoto's list of some important things – embodiments of hope.
1. The Things that Remain Behind After;
  2. Building relationships that continue with my children and grandchildren;
  3. Having relationships with family who are now gone;
  4. Relationship to art is the relationship to self;
  5. Solving problems – I have become better at life.

Sakamoto's 'important things' live in the layers of the work. As with ice, the layers are not opaque, either physically or metaphorically. When looking through ice, one does not see surface; one sees hints of things that are partially revealed through the surface. Sakamoto's *Boro* works reveal past, present, and even future of family.

<sup>1</sup> S. Szczepanek. (2001). *SRI*. <https://www.srithreads.com/collections/boro-textiles>  
<sup>2</sup> All Susan Sakamoto quotations are from conversations and correspondence with Deborah Forbes. (November 2019).  
<sup>3</sup> J. Bishop and K. Rothkopf. (2016). *Matisse/Diebenkorn*. Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, and San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.  
<sup>4</sup> L. Cohen and H. Baker. (2015). *Notes to myself: Diebenkorn's 10 rules for painting*. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/diebenkorn-ten-rules>



*The Telegram, 2019*  
acrylic, found and family papers, artist printed papers, graphite, image transfer, oil pastels  
61 x 61 cm

*Black Velvet and a Song III, 2019*  
acrylic, found and family papers, artist printed papers, graphite, crayon  
61 x 61 cm

*Bedtime Story, 2018*  
acrylic, house paint, found and family papers, artist painted papers  
183 x 23 cm

*Silk Fan, 2019*  
acrylic, house paint, found and family papers, artist painted papers, silk fan  
183 x 23 cm



*Remembered Birdsong I, 2019*  
house paint, acrylic, found and family papers, silk  
61 x 61 cm

*Remembered Birdsong II, 2019*  
house paint, acrylic, found and family papers, silk  
61 x 61 cm

