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Drawing on tragedy

Visit this Toronto cultural centre and be reminded of an act of Canadian injustice with lasting consequences

EDWARD BROWN
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Louise Noguchi, along with nine other artists, worked on "The Shape of Loss."

R.J. JOHNSTON TORONTO STAR

In Japanese folklore, phantom fishing boats known as *funayurei* vengefully ply the waters, attempting to sink passing boats. Multidisciplinary visual artist and educator Louise Noguchi has created a ghostly fleet of her own, one that, rather than seeking vengeance, sparks dialogue about a shameful event in Canada's past.

Noguchi's fleet figuratively docked in Toronto during Nuit Blanche in October, when the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC) hosted "The Shape of Loss."

For 12 hours starting at 7 p.m. it was all hands on deck, as her crew of nine artists began tracing the projected outlines of the hulls of the 1,137 fishing boats confiscated by the Canadian government in 1941 onto the gallery wall, while 20 announcers recited details about the boats and their owners.

Each image, superimposed in charcoal over the next, as the hours passed, slowly revealed the haunting image of a long-forgotten historical event.

Many are aware of the internment of Japanese Canadians beginning in 1942, but Noguchi's endeavour is anchored in a slightly earlier injustice.

At a post-Nuit Blanche talk at the JCCC in November, Joy Takahashi, a member of the arts committee instrumental in organizing the event, provided historical context for the exhibit. "The day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the federal government ordered the confiscation of fishing boats and communication equipment from Nikkei (Japanese) fishermen along the coast of British Columbia."

Literally overnight, the fishermen and their families became enemy aliens. The seizure was initially assumed to be temporary. Instead, Takahashi explained, the specs of each vessel were entered into a ledger and then sold.

Their source of income gone, the loss affected families for generations.

SEE ART, IN4

Piece took significant planning

ART FROM IN1

Artists begin to sketch vessels lost to the 1941 confiscation by the Canadian government at Toronto's Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre.

NEILL STURGESS

Descendants seldom discussed the injustice.

More than eight decades later, Noguchi used details from the ledger, kept by Japanese-Canadian Kishizo Kimura, as the foundation for "The Shape of Loss."

"The reason why I made this work was to experience the size of what was lost," Noguchi told the audience in November. Her immediate family didn't own fishing boats, but they were employed in the industry. Her grandfather headed a local fishermen's benevolent society, her grandmother worked in a cannery, and her father worked summers at a fish camp. The family was eventually detained in an internment camp.

A significant amount of planning went into organizing "The Shape of Loss." Realizing the undertaking could not be completed alone, the artist solicited help from others.

She believed it essential to draw each hull to scale, some measuring up to 21 metres in length and had considered creating individual sketches of each, but decided, in the planning stage, that it would be more effective to "stack them on the wall, one drawing after another."

Overlapping outlines create visual entanglement resembling intertwined fishing nets.

Involvement of descendants was crucial. "Having descendants of the boat owners announce the size of the boats and tell their story" effectively connected the past to the present.

She had no difficulty locating descendants and reached out to family friends she knew had an ancestral connection to the subject. In addition, she placed an ad in the Nikkei Voice, a national Japanese-Canadian newspaper, and on social media. She said she received a wave of interest that "started as a trickle and slowly grew."

Planning sessions were held via Zoom. Initially, Noguchi struggled to parlay her vision to participants. "When I first talked about the project, they didn't understand what I meant." Soon, however, a collaborative spirit emerged as participants provided helpful input. One recommended that artists wear white painter's coveralls. Noguchi agreed and found it "a good way to differentiate the artist from the audience."

The role of announcers was equally important. They recited the names of the boats and their owners, the types of fishing vessels, and hull sizes.

The emotionally charged evening proved contemplative. The November talk was attended by many participants, who described the Nuit Blanche event as "quite moving," "very serious" and "a Zen kind of experience."

Alison S.M. Kobayashi, an accomplished artist in her own right, announced details of her ancestors' confiscated boats and shared her family's story. "For many of us, it was really a revelation," Kobayashi told the Star. "People in Toronto are quite distant from this history. Being in a roomful of people with this shared lineage in fishing, and the disconnection, and then bringing it back together formed a community around the project. It was joyful even though it was a heavy subject."

By the end of Nuit Blanche, Noguchi's crew had traced and announced about 300 names in the fleet. The remainder of the flotilla was completed in the coming weeks.

"The Shape of Loss" also includes Noguchi's handwritten notes on the impounded fleet, covering the entire gallery wall opposite the outlined fishing boats. This task alone required two and a half months to complete. A documentary, including a time-lapse video, was also produced.

Reflecting on Nuit Blanche, Noguchi was pleased with the turnout and encouraged by the intergenerational quality of the evening. "I liked seeing the conversation between different age groups. You don't see that too often in art."

When the exhibit closes in mid-January, the enormous image will be carefully taken down, rolled in glassine paper and stored.

Noguchi is hopeful the work will tour. "I'd love for it to travel, (however) there aren't many places with large enough walls," adding, "ideally, it would be purchased by a museum able to look after the work." The Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby expressed interest in showing the video.

"A permanent home might be found in the Canadian Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg," Noguchi mused. "There are a lot of things percolating."

In the meantime, after the exhibit closes, a Japanese ceremony known as a *harae* will be performed to cleanse the gallery space of lingering spirits of fishermen who suffered a grave injustice at the outbreak of the Second World War.

"THE SHAPE OF LOSS" AND ACCOMPANYING VIDEO WILL REMAIN AT THE JCCC, 6 SAKURA WAY, UNTIL JAN. 23, 2026.

The outlines of 1,137 fishing boats were drawn on top of each other.

R.J. JOHNSTON/ TORONTO STAR

Confiscated fishing boats were held at the Annieville Dike on the Fraser River in British Columbia. The boats owned by Japanese Canadians were taken in 1941.

VIA NIKKEI NATIONAL MUSEUM