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IN THE GARDEN WITH RON VAN DONGEN

A CONVERSATION WITH EMILY HANAKO MOMOHARA

PORTFOLIOS: KEVIN BUTLER, NINA MARIE RAMBO

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EMILY HANAKO MOMOHARA

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FAMILY

BY JUDITH TURNER-YAMAMOTO

Emily Hanako Momohara creates conceptual landscapes in homage to her Japanese and Hawaiian heritage. Intrigued by collective memory and its relationship to the imagination, her images combine the real and fictional to create places that explore familial history, legacy, myth and belonging.

Dealing with issues of loss and death, many of Momohara's photographs take their inspiration from Japanese scroll paintings depicting the four seasons — where nature's cycle symbolizes the order of life, death and regeneration. Fleeting memories slip away, while revelation and growth evolve through time. Eerily beautiful, dark and strangely quiet, Momohara's photographs convey at once the idea of obscurity and the quest for information.

Momohara grew up near Seattle, Washington, earning a BFA in photography and a BA in art history from the University of Washington. She went on to receive an MFA in expanded media from the University of Kansas, where she studied under Roger Shimomura. A former assistant professor of art at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, where she headed the photography department, Momohara exhibits her work nationally. She received

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a 2011 Ohio Arts Council Excellence Grant and has been a visiting artist at several residency programs, including the Center for Photography at Woodstock in Woodstock, New York and Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Judith Turner-Yamamoto: When did your focus on legacy and family begin?

Emily Hanako Momohara: Near the end of my undergraduate studies, I began visiting World War II relocation centers. My family had been sent to Minidoka in Idaho.

JTY: Had anyone else in your family gone back there?

EHM: No. From my research, I understood there wasn't a lot left at Minidoka. It was very hot and dusty, and I spent a lot of time making sure my equipment didn't get ruined. This was 1999, and there was no visitor's center as there is now. I was really just wandering around. I couldn't imagine my grandmother being in that situation; it was very emotional. I didn't get anything from the trip beyond the resolve to experience as many camps as I could.

In 2000, I gave my dad a plane ticket for Father's Day to travel with me to Minidoka. I told him, you have to come; you'll get a lot out of it. He did, especially with us going together. I was photographing, he was holding my books and gear, and we would find things together. At that point, I decided I wanted to do an exhibition for the 60th anniversary of Executive Order 9066 in 2002. My dad has been involved in public service and politics his whole career, so he had helpful connections. We started talking about how that could happen.

I was able to travel to seven camps for the exhibition. I did two shows simultaneously: at Seattle Community College Art Gallery and at the State Capitol Rotunda in Olympia, Washington. We had a reception on February 18, observing the day that Roosevelt signed EO 9066. The state legislature invited veterans to perform the color guard, and members of Congress spoke. It was exciting to be a part of something like that.



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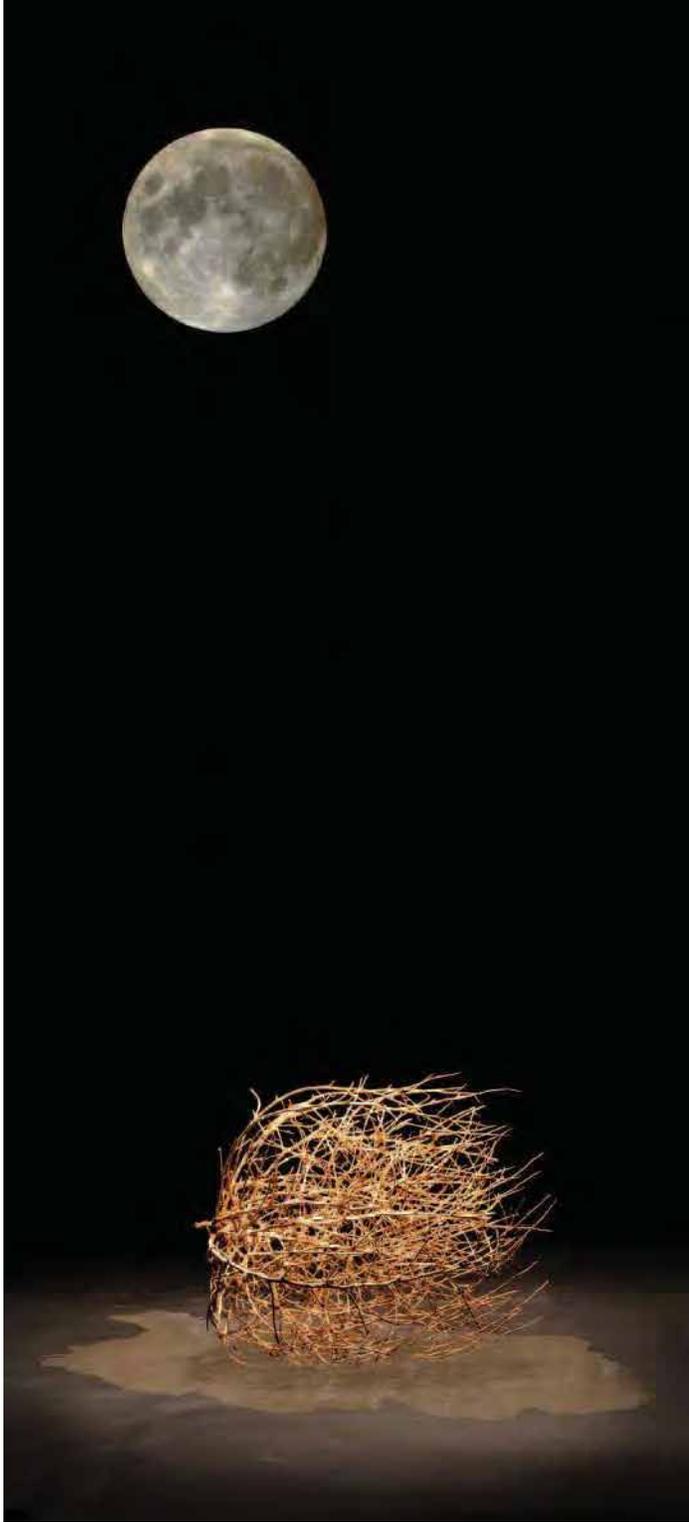
Ohashi: Chopsticks, 2006. From the Desert Sands Project



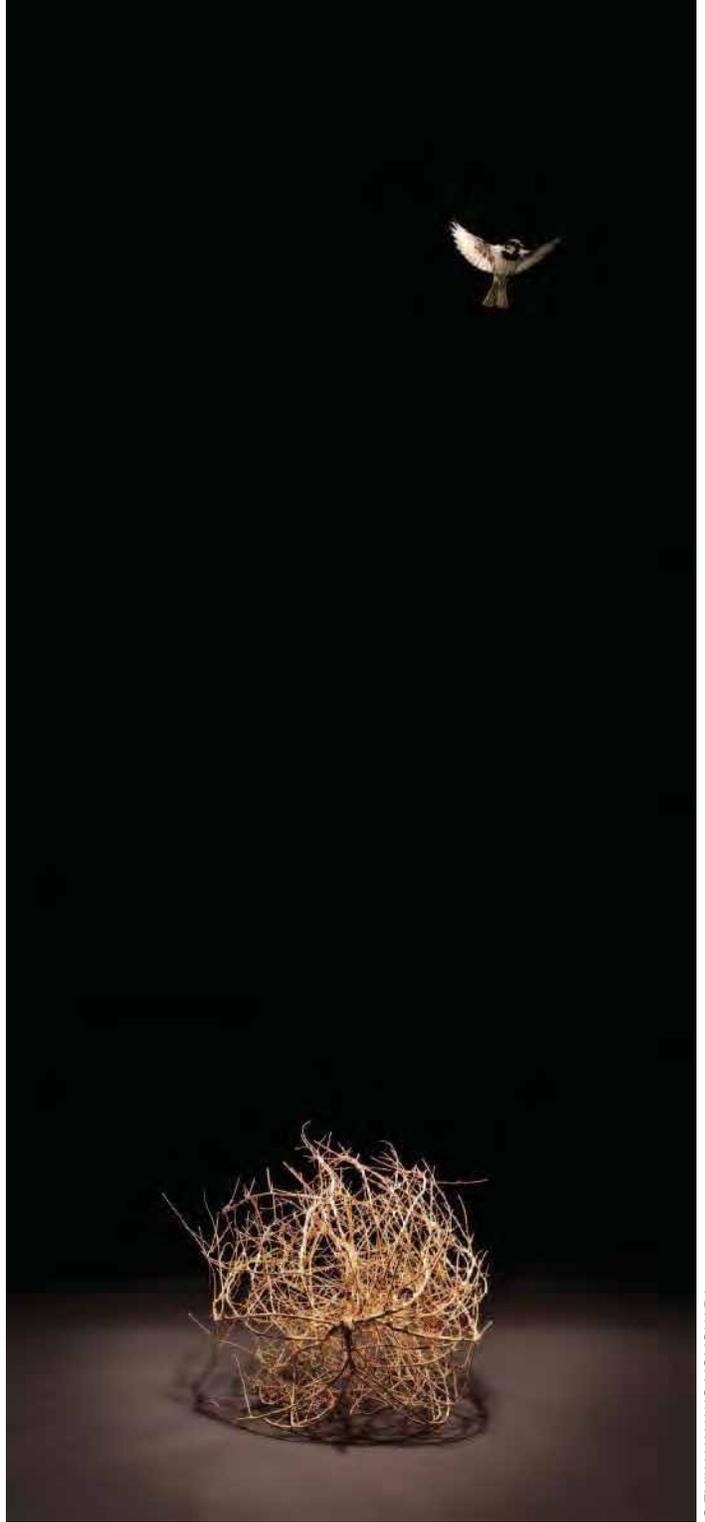


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Clementine
Summer, 2012



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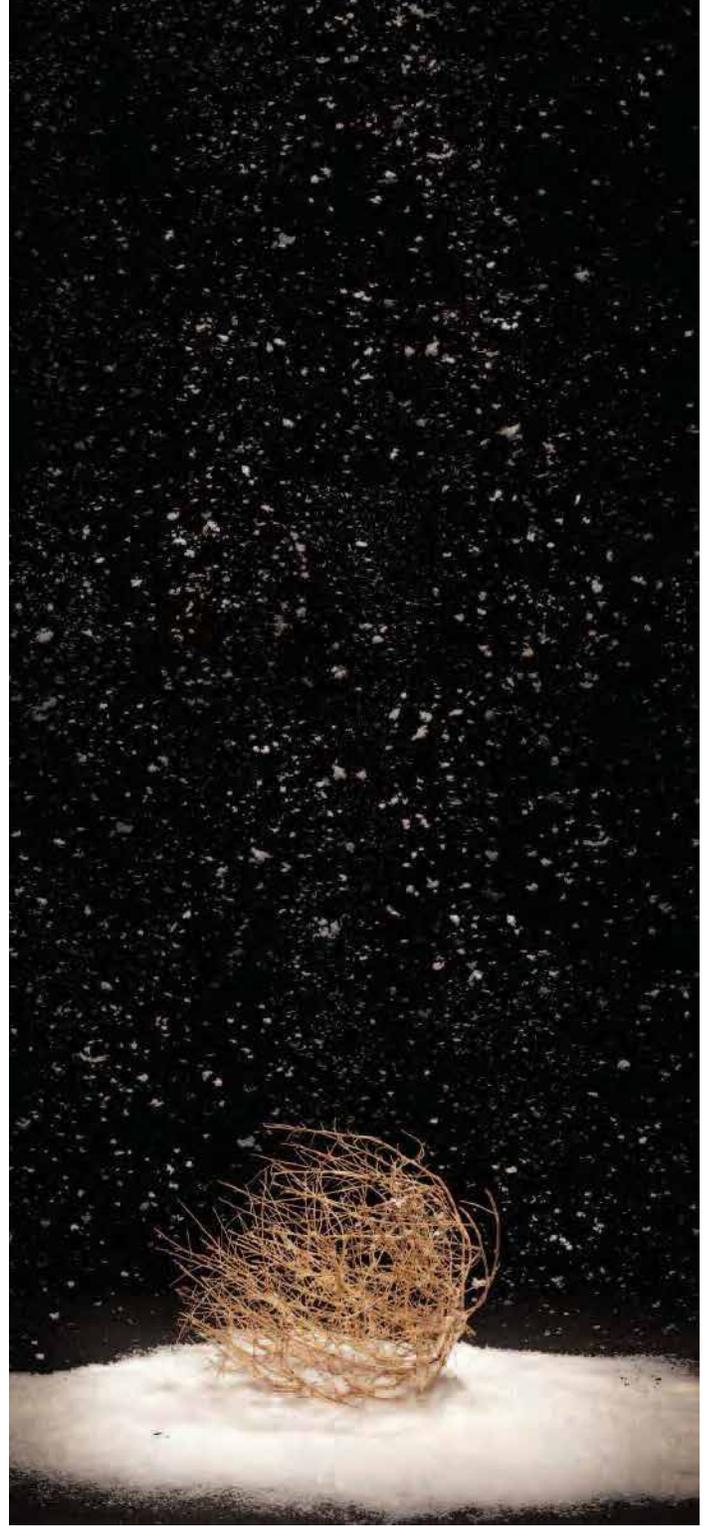
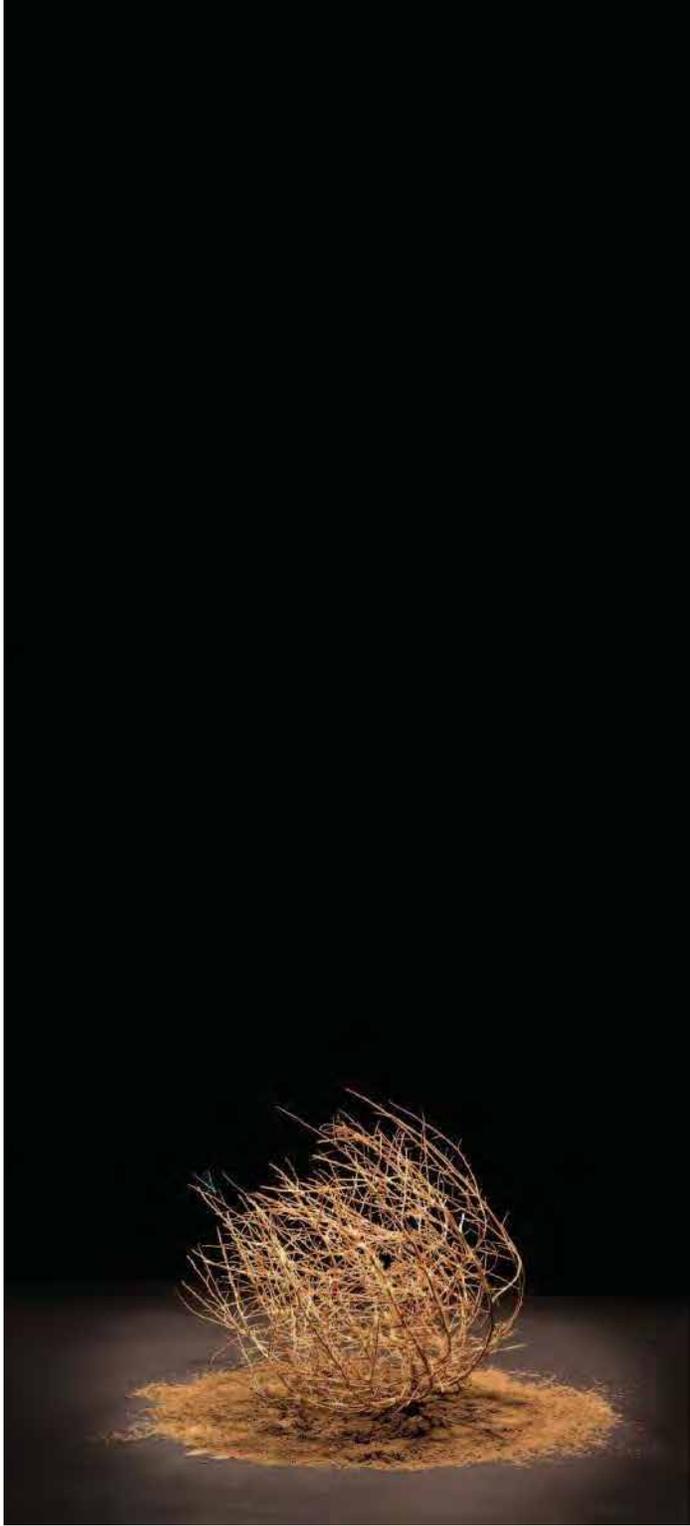


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“My compositions are very minimal—the tone qualities tend to be somewhat monochromatic, even when I’m working in color.” - Emily Hanako Momohara

JTY: You started graduate school in 2003. How did you settle on the University of Kansas?

EHM: My thesis paper for my BA in art history was on Roger Shimomura, a painter and performance artist who taught at the University of Kansas. His context and content aligned with my interests. I knew I wanted to study with him. I started out wanting to be like Roger. His work is very much influenced by American pop art. He’s loud, he screams his messages. He’s an activist who grew up during the Civil Rights period. I originally tried to emulate that kind of voice in my



*Opposite left to right: Sagebrush, 2011
Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter*

work, and I kept falling down.

JTY: Because it wasn't you?

EHM: It wasn't me. Finally, another professor and performance artist, So Yeon Park, asked me in her sassy, blunt way why I was trying so hard to be Roger. I began a process of reevaluation, looking at all my work before I got to Kansas to discover my voice.

JTY: What did that process look like for you?

EHM: I was thinking about intonation, visually and emotionally. My compositions are very minimal—the tone qualities tend to be somewhat monochromatic, even when I'm working in color.



© EMILY HANAKO MOMOHARA

Four Cots, 2002. Minidoka Barrack

**“I began a process of reevaluation,
looking at all my work to discover my voice.”**

- Emily Hanako Momohara

I tend to make very dark images. I was looking at what that voice really is and how it relates to that content and what I’m trying to say with my work. I make work that comes from a very personal place, so I always feel very connected to it.

JTY: What happened with your work after graduate school?

EHM: I was told that in my first year as a full-time professor, I wouldn’t make any work because I would be so absorbed with getting my curriculum and preparation down. But I was determined not to have that happen. I started a project called *Desert Sands*, inspired by a video in my thesis exhibition. The video was



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Gathering, 2012

of me being covered by sand in a pseudo sandstorm. My grandmother's voice is in the background talking about her experience at Minidoka and the sandstorms there. I incorporated bird songs — there are a lot of birds at Minidoka now, they have reclaimed the landscape — and I included an Arabic lullaby. This was post 9/11, and some of the same kinds of discrimination were going on with people of Arab or Muslim backgrounds, so I wanted to address that.

I decided to develop a series of photographs inspired by the video. I literally made a sandbox in my apartment. I'd start working at 11 pm. Thinking about the sand, I felt like an archaeologist trying to discover my family's World War II experience.

JTY: These were your grandparents?

EHM: Yes. My great-grandparents emigrated from Japan. My grandfather's family came from Okinawa in the 1890s and settled in Hawaii. My grandmother's family came from southern Honshu in the 1920s and settled in Seattle. So they had been in the States long before the war. My grandfather volunteered for the Army and was in Europe for most of it.

JTY: This legacy has defined everything you've done.

EHM: Yes, the sense of place defined by this connection is a thread through all my work. With *Desert Sands*, I physically and literally used the desert to investigate the experience of the incarceration camps. My great-grandparents obviously aren't around anymore, and my grandmother is my last living grandparent. Access to these stories and the opportunity to hear what happened is slipping by. She doesn't like to talk about it — it's very painful. For her, the whole incarceration experience belongs in the past. She can't understand my desire to connect with it.

JTY: You've been working on the *Islands* series for several years now. What precipitated that work?

EHM: It's also about legacy, about exploring cultural elements that are woven into my experience. I use materials that are part of the landscape to try to reconstruct a history, much of which has

been lost. The work began with Hawaii. We've always gone there to visit family; I lived there between high school and college. My grandfather was one of nine children and the only one to leave the islands permanently. To my Hawaiian relatives, I'm the haole/outsider/mainlander cousin. I've always felt included and excluded, a bit like being half-Japanese. In Seattle, when I would get introduced, I was "hapa yonsei," fourth generation half-Japanese. Even though the Japanese Seattle community embraced me, I'm still hapa yonsei.

JTY: What does that mean to them?

EHM: I think now it means something different than when I was growing up. It's complex. It just means there's kind of a disclaimer. I think that's my approach, being a mixed race person in general. The Caucasian world looks at me as being very Asian, so I'm always in this in-between place.

In 2011, I went with my dad to Okinawa to try to find my great-grandparents' families. We didn't know much; we went with a few pictures and a ship manifest we had found on ancestry.com. I showed a picture of my great-grandfather's tomb in Hawaii at one government office. We learned Momohara is not pronounced Momohara in Okinawa, it's Tobaru. It still means peach orchard, which is what Momohara means, and the kanji is the same. It's just pronounced differently because Okinawa is so far south that they have a lot of Chinese and Pacific Islander influence.

We were then able to track down the last place my great-grandmother lived before she emigrated. My grandfather's cousins still live there. We just showed up at their house, and they were thrilled to see us. The first day we couldn't really talk to them. They're quite old, so their Japanese is different. We came back with a translator two days later. They took us down the street to meet a gentleman my father's age from the Tobaru side. He wrote out the family tree and talked about the family. I did a ton of shooting. It was so inspirational.

Before this trip, I'd been focused on the scroll images based

“I think about the whole idea of history or legacy as a puzzle, putting facts and myths together...who knows what the truth is? Is truth really what fact is, or is myth truth?”

- Emily Hanako Momohara

on the seasons. But the Okinawan landscape and its similarities and connections to Hawaii took over. My family went from being sugar farmers in Okinawa to pineapple farmers in Hawaii. I just delved into the *Islands* work.

JTY: Let's talk about the Somerset Velvet paper you're using. Did you print on it before, or did you start with *Islands*?

EHM: I started with *Islands*. Somerset Velvet is really tactile. It's a drawing paper originally and it's really toothy, especially if you're working in charcoal. Epson and Moab got together with Somerset Velvet and made a paper that would accept pigment ink. I was able to print the images on that and obtain a very lush surface. To depict island environments — moss, sand, water — a tactile paper made sense to me.

JTY: There is a dual sensation looking at the work — the imagery at once pops and becomes part of the paper. I have the feeling of looking at discovered fragments.

EHM: Yes, they are. I think about the whole idea of history or legacy as a puzzle, putting facts and myths together...who knows what the truth is? Is truth really what fact is, or is myth truth? Then there are the stories our families chose to tell us. I grew up thinking my ancestors lived on an island called Momohara, but they actually lived in the town of Tobaru.

The whole mystique dissolved when we started finding out the facts behind the stories. The myths still resonate for the majority of my family. We thought we were wealthy enough to have our own island. You can't take away what that adage means to a family. It's like trying to reconcile all these new facts with what I already had in my mind, and that's the intersection where the work is born.

JTY: In *Island 8*, what are we looking at? Is it a constructed image?

EHM: Yes, a construction in my studio. I was trying to make my own island, almost like a child putting together a fantasy place. I made a whole series of different islands working with materials sourced from model train stores. *Island 3* is goya, a bitter melon I had for the first time in Okinawa. I made a little mountain and a reflection, I was playing with that. Maybe that was my disillusionment with the myth that didn't turn out to be true.

JTY: What about ritual — does that play into this series?

EHM: Yes. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my great-grandmother — she didn't pass away until I was 11. She was a perfect hybrid of Japanese and American culture. She converted to Christianity when she came to the States but still worshipped like a Buddhist. She had a Buddhist-style altar in her house depicting Jesus, and there was a crucifix. She would put clementines or mochi (rice cakes) out for him. I started thinking about those objects. The clementines were evocative of the Bon Odori Festival when ancestors are honored. Putting out these symbolic gifts — images, in this case — would be appropriate. Then I wanted to do the yin and yang, so I put the clementines in the freezer and misted them until they developed gray ice. I photographed them to show back and forth, heaven and earth, thinking about generations, possibilities. I had not planned on the mochi falling down — they kept doing that on their own, and I thought, this might work.

Island 2 is the Royal Hotel in Okinawa, which is supposed to be haunted. They quit construction halfway because people were dying at the site; it was built near a burial ground. My dad and I went in anyway, it's private property now. I loved the idea of the island, of nature reclaiming that rooftop. *Island 10* depicts a reproduction of a traditional Okinawan home built for an international exposition. Somehow it wasn't unlike what I was trying to do in my work.

JTY: So you felt some resonance with this kind of fabricated past.

EHM: Definitely.

JTY: What's next for you?

EHM: I have an upcoming residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California. I'm working on a series of video scrolls for my FotoFocus 2014 show at Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio. We're going to construct a faux wall, put TV screens behind it and embed video scrolls in the wall. ▲

Judith Turner-Yamamoto is an art critic, curator and fiction/features writer based in Washington, D.C. and Cincinnati, Ohio. Her articles have appeared in Elle, The Boston Globe, Finnair, The Los Angeles Times, Travel & Leisure, and Interiors.