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*Un / Weaving*  
Haji Oh

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# ALISON BRADLEY PROJECTS

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Portrait of the artist Haji Oh. Photograph by Keizo Kioku (2018)



*Un / Weaving*

**Haji Oh**

March 7 - April 20, 2024

Curated by Eimi Tagore-Erwin

## Introduction

Haji Oh (b. Osaka, 1976) is a third generation Zainichi Korean artist, born and raised in Japan and now based in Australia. She draws on her family's migration from Jeju Island to Japan in the 1930s to trace transpacific memory through dynamic experiments with textile, photography, and cyanotype. She studied Dyeing and Weaving at the Kyoto City University of the Arts, receiving her MA in 2002 and PhD in 2012. Oh is a recipient of the 2024-26 Tokyo Contemporary Art Award (TCAA).

*Un / Weaving* showcases a selection of artworks representative of Oh's oeuvre as she gives expression to the liminality of communities that are often obscured by national histories. Through the labor intensive processes of weaving, unraveling, and printing, the artist uses textile to explore the three-dimensional space of memory, revealing hidden layers and blank spaces that mirror the variability of reconstructed narratives.

Oh's early works, *Three Generations* (2004) and *Three Generations of Time* (2004) express the "unknowability" of her grandmother's migration story after she passed away in 2001. Combining portraiture and traditional dress, these works address Oh's identity as a Korean in Japan and questions about her grandmother's past. In the late 2000s, Oh began to incorporate extensive archival research about transpacific migration into her work. Her experiences in Toronto as a visiting scholar at York University and intern at the Textile Museum of Canada led to *Another Story* (2010), expanding her introspective practice to remember the experiences of incarcerated Japanese-Canadian women during WWII. Oh moved to Australia in 2014, where she started her *grand-mother island project* series (2017–Present), tracing untold stories of migrant labor communities that have crossed the Pacific Ocean. *Un / Weaving* features three chapters of Oh's ongoing project, including the first of the artist's site-specific *Seabird Habitatscapes* series (2024–Present). Juxtaposed with a projection of an archival British map of the Pacific from 1798, Oh combines cyanotype and *bogushigasuri* (warp printing ikat) to recontextualize the idyllic landscapes of Nauru and Papua New Guinea, contending with the logic of empire entangled in cartography, phosphate mining, and labor migration in the Pacific from a bird's-eye view.

Each installation of Oh's work in a new space is a form of ritual. As she shifts seamlessly between the personal and global, the memory of Oh's grandmother is carried into the present as both a grounding figure and metaphor for inherited pasts. *Un / Weaving* highlights the artist's distinct approach to textile and memory, creating an intimate space for viewers to reimagine the past while reflecting on the limits of national boundaries.



「2004年、はじめて訪れた濟州島  
祖母と母のチマ・チョゴリをまとう  
島の風をはらむチマ

それらの記憶をつむいでみる  
その糸はいつしか私の皮膚となる」

*“In 2004, my first trip to Jeju-Island  
I wear my grandmother’s and mother’s chima chogori  
And they swell with the Island’s wind  
I’ll spin these memories  
These threads that will someday become my skin”*

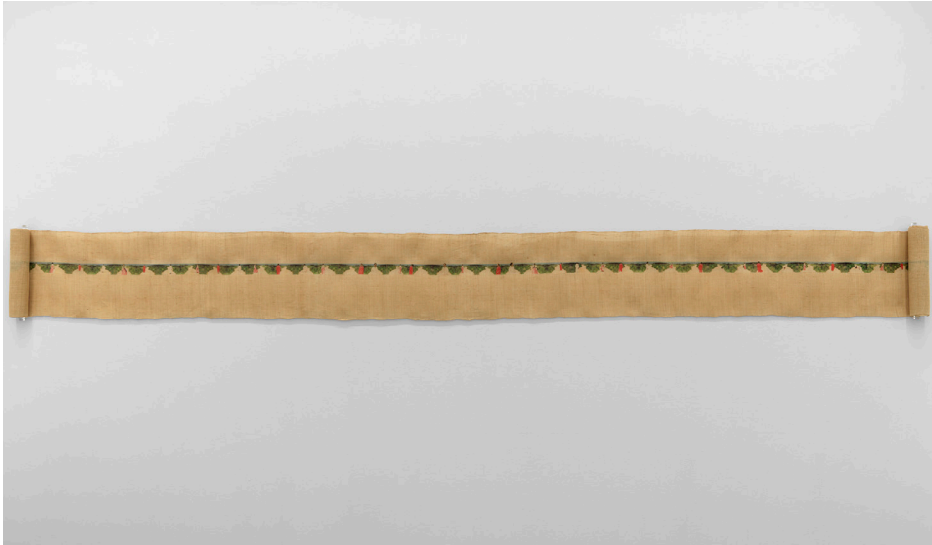
— Haji Oh, Kuruyama Museum of Art, Okayama, 2019



*Three Generations*, 2004, C-print in custom frame, 38 ½ x 8 ⅞ x ¾ inches

Photograph by Dario Lasagni





*Three Generations of Time*, 2004, Photo on sanbe fabric (hemp cloth), 17 7/8 x 196 3/4 inches





*Three Flowers*, 2004, Silk *hanbok*, tie-dye, brush dye, embroidery, 55 ½ x 59 inches

Photograph by Tomas Svab





*Another Story*, 2010, Jute rope, silk yarn, audio, 39  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 3  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Photograph by Kazuo Fukunaga



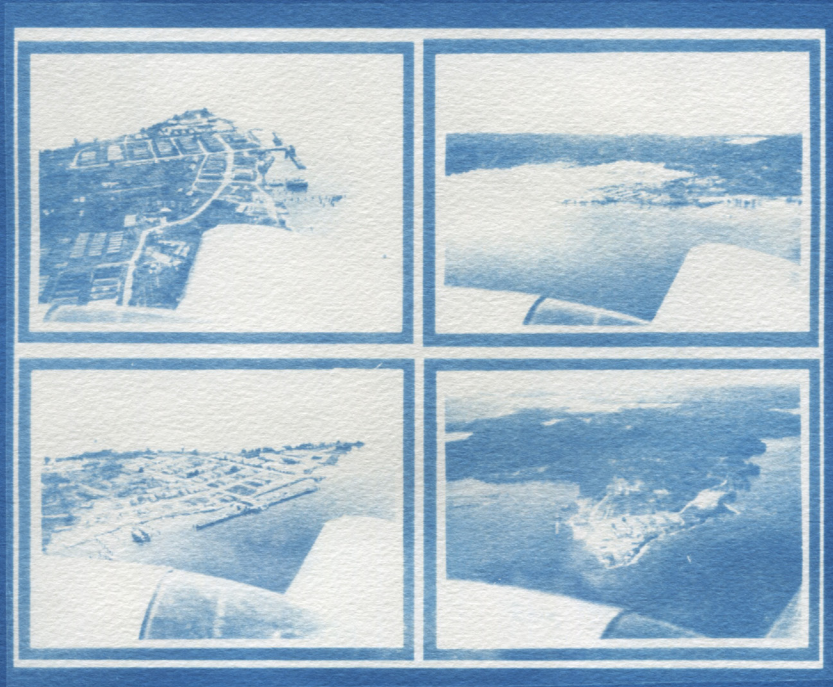
Photograph by Yuzuru Nemoto

*Untitled (A House of Memory Traces series)*, 2019, Linen yarn, 35  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 118  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches



Photograph by Yuzuru Nemoto



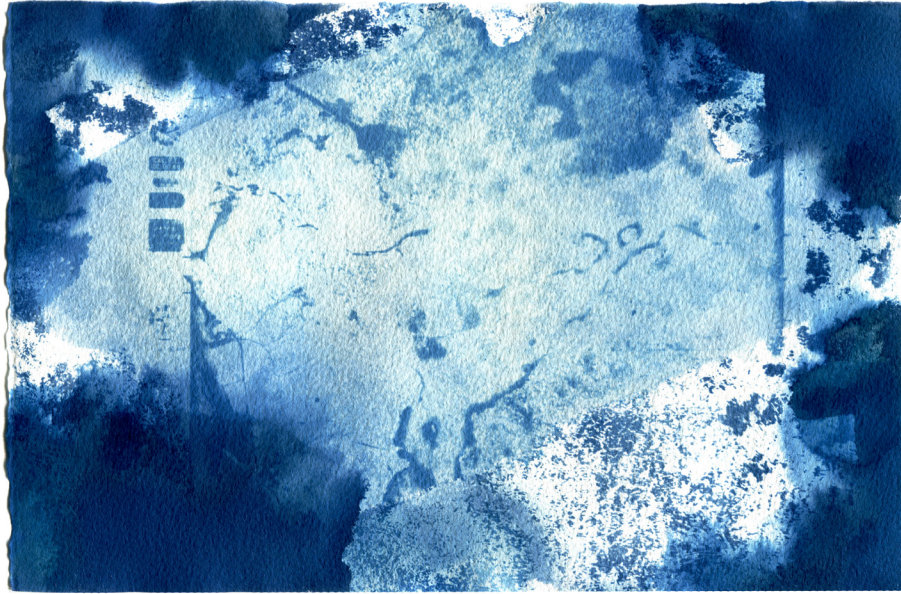


*Los Negros Island 1949, 2022, Cyanotype on paper, 11 5/8 x 16 1/2 inches*

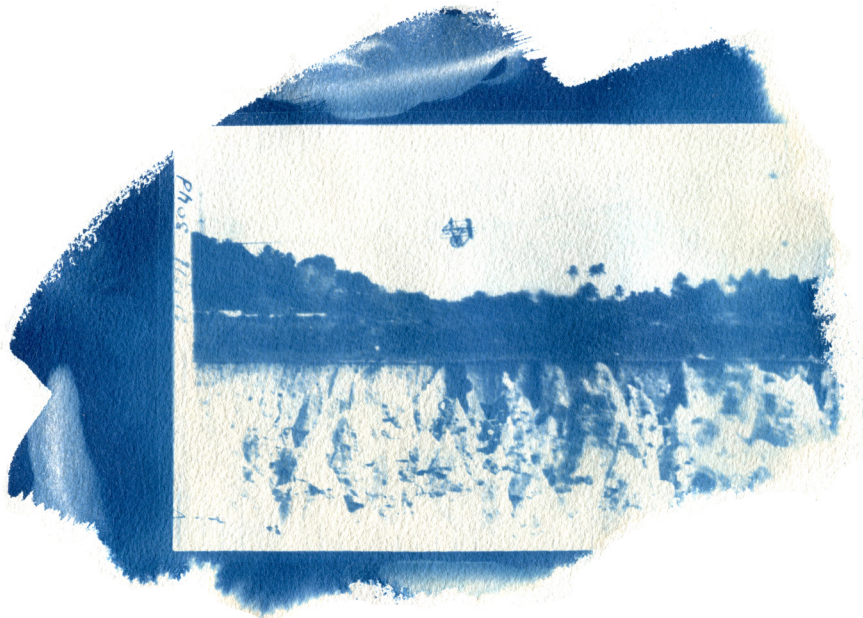


*Phosphate fields*, 2022, Cyanotype on paper, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



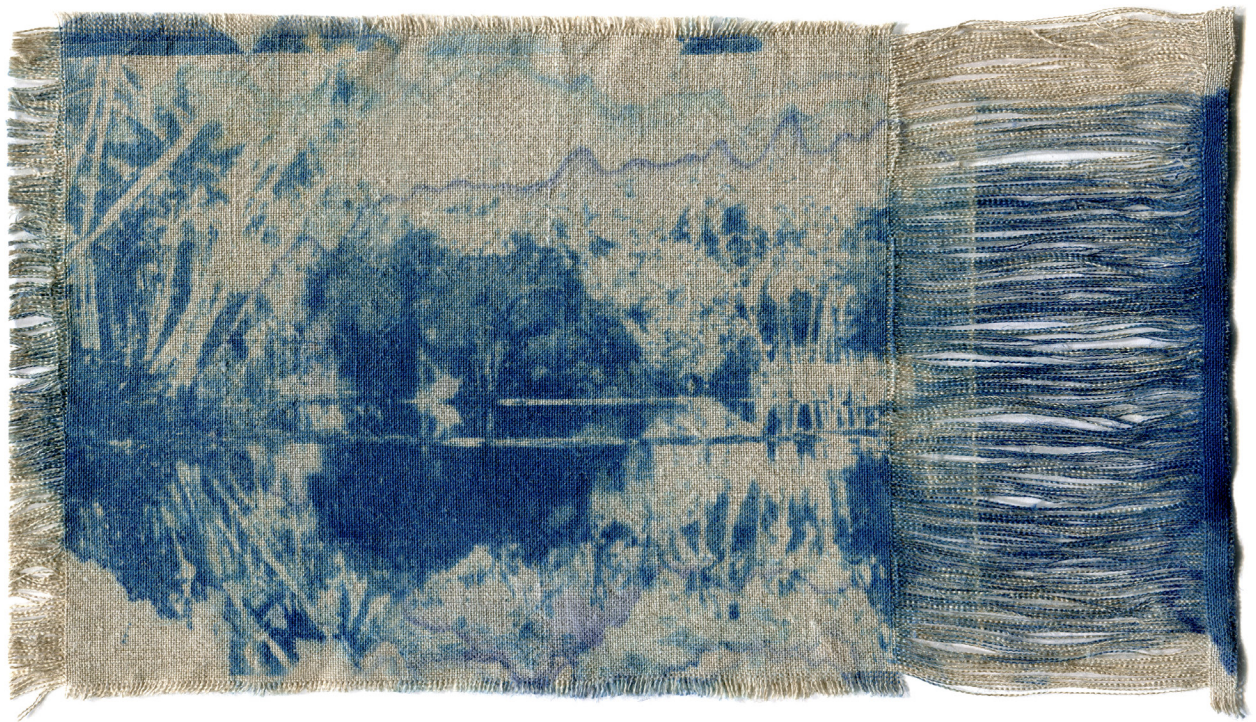


*Aerial photography, Momote, 2022, Cyanotype on paper, 11.7 x 16.5 in*



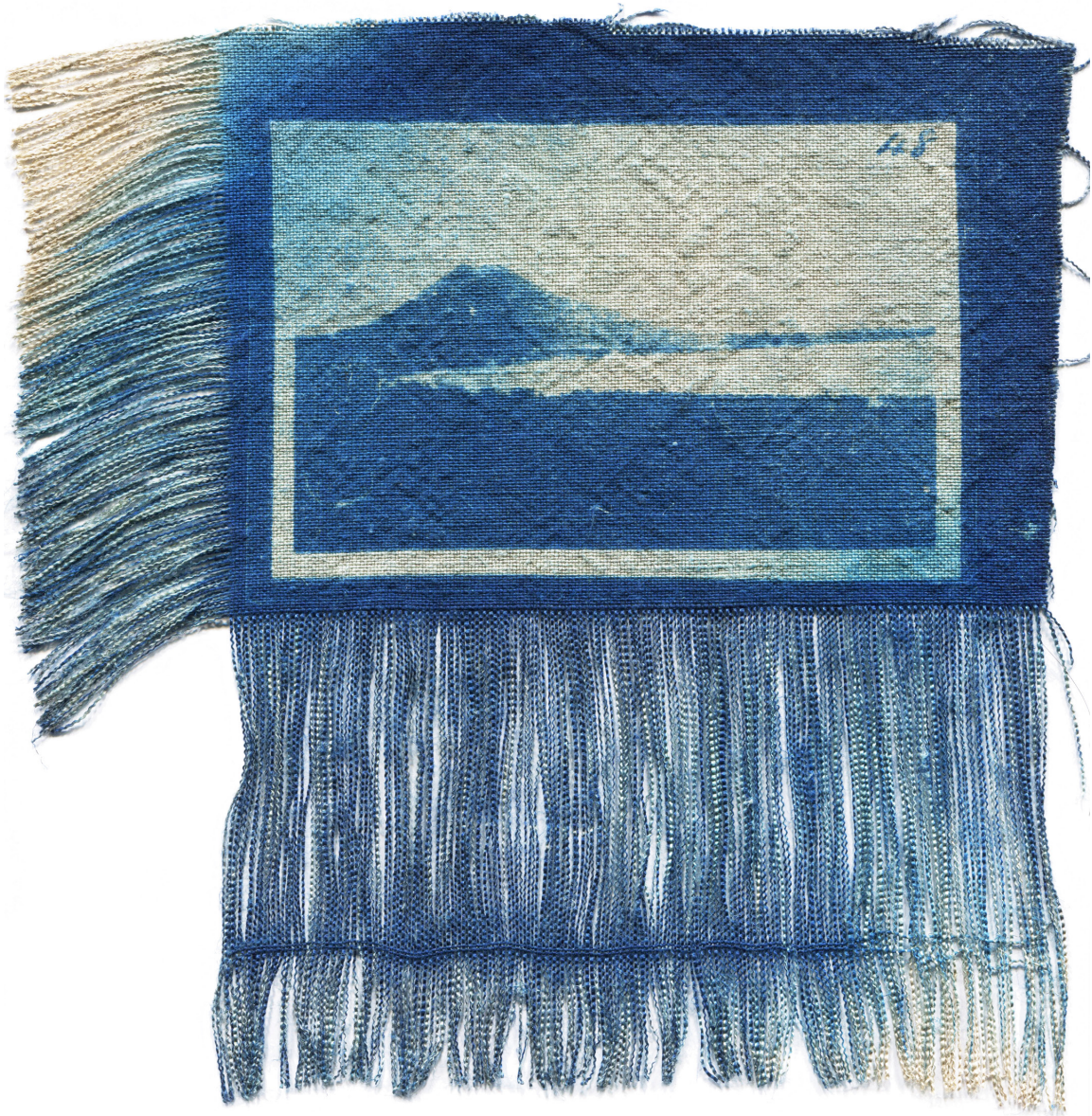
*Phosphate fields in Banaba Island, 2022, Cyanotype on paper, 11 1/8 x 16 1/2 inches*





*Landscape of Lagoon in Nauru*, 2023, Cyanotype on linen fabric, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches





*Mother Mountain*, 2023, Cyanotype on linen fabric, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches





*Road in PNG and railway tracks in Christmas Island, 2023, Cyanotype on paper, 11½ x 16½ inches*

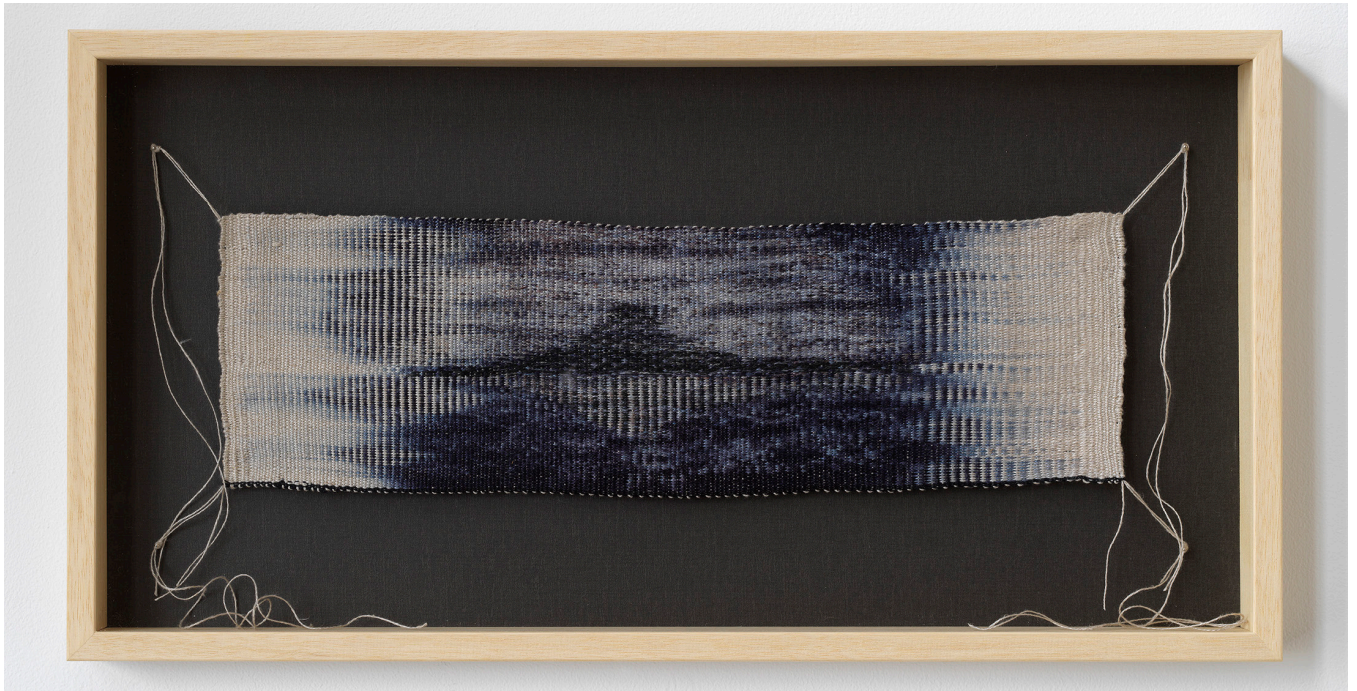




*Textile as a map-mt.k #2, 2023, Linen, four-selvaged cloth, warp-faced pick-up patterns, 11 ¾ x 23 ⅝ inches*



*Textile as a map-t.i #2, 2023, Linen, four-selvaged cloth, warp-faced pick-up patterns, 11 ¾ x 23 ⅝ inches*



*Textile as a map-j.i #2*, 2023, Linen, four-selvaged cloth, warp-faced pick-up patterns, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 23  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

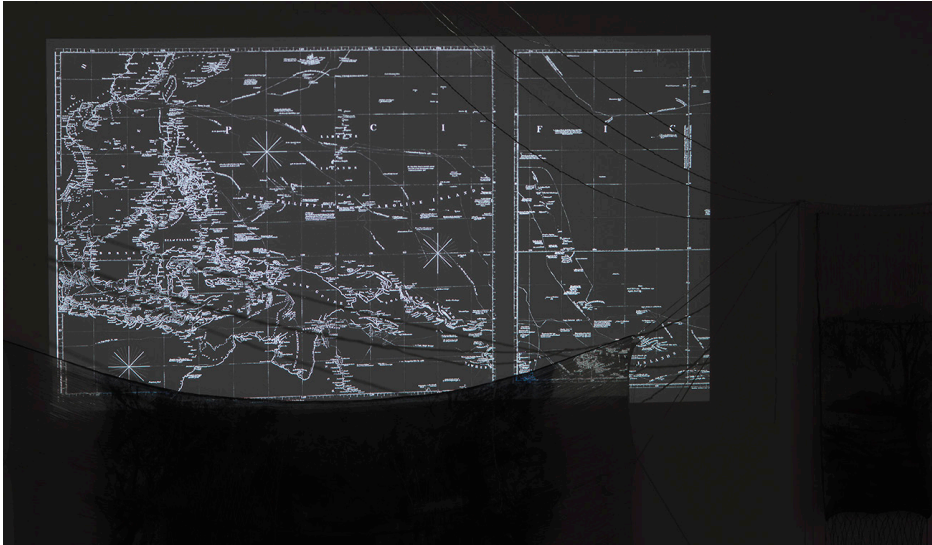




*Seabird Habitatscape #1 - Bunda Lagoon and Mother Mountain, 2024, Linen, cyanotype, warp-faced pick-up patterns, four-selvaged cloth, and projection*

Photograph by Dario Lasagni





# WRITINGS



*“Oh Haji's work stands out for its balanced emphasis on both the broad strokes of history and the nuanced stories of individuals often overlooked in grand historical narratives. Her textile creations, through the mediums of dyeing and weaving, represent the intricate tapestry of geopolitics, women's history, and the narratives of migration and immigration.”*

— Selection Committee for the Tokyo Contemporary Art Award (TCAA), 2024

## Curatorial Statement

Born with two names, Haji Oh (呉夏枝, お・はぢ) is also known as Natsue Okamura, using the Japanese surname taken on by her family after they emigrated from Jeju Island in the 1930s. The artist began to openly embrace the name Haji Oh when she was 17 years old, a bold choice that disclosed her Korean ethnicity to her peers in Japan as she formed a new community at Kyoto University of the Arts and began her career in textile arts.<sup>1</sup>

I was first introduced to Oh's work six years ago by the stunning anthology *Still Hear the Wound: Toward an Asia, Politic, and Art to Come*, which radically explores the intersections of postcolonial memory, feminism, and contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> On the occasion of Oh's first solo exhibition in the US—where the myth of Japan's ethnic homogeneity is still normalized—I offer the following essay to contextualize her work within a transpacific historical framework. Now viewed on American soil, a land echoing with immigrant stories, Oh's work seems to expand and contract, impacted by the experiences of diasporic audiences that reside here and encounter her work, many of whom have carved out lives here as a result of US militarism in the Asia Pacific and around the world. But even as the artist herself engages with the interplay of individual and universal storytelling, it's important to remain wary of allowing her work to become reduced to a narrative representational of all *Zainichi* Koreans, or Korean residents of Japan. In each of Oh's works in *Un / Weaving*, the individual mark of the artist's hands is unmistakable: methodically planned patterns, textures, colors, and tensions juxtaposed by the spontaneous outcomes of her weaving processes. Her work is deeply personal, bringing nebulous traces into the real, tangible form of textile—a choice to materialize silence into being, so that the abstraction of memories cannot be theorized into oblivion or become instrumentalized for political agendas. Rather than becoming trapped within the binary logic of identity politics, Oh expertly—and gracefully—navigates herself around the pitfalls of majority/minority discourses that are bound and separated by the restrictive framework of the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> She has always taken a transnational position, exploring the *in-between* as her starting point.

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<sup>1</sup> Oh, Haji. "What does the Ethnic Costume Represent?" *Asia Colloquia Papers* 1(3). Toronto: York Centre for Asian Research. 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, Chonghwa (ed.), *Still Hear the Wound: Toward an Asia, Politics, and Art to Come*. Translated by Rebecca Jennison and Brett De Bary. Cornell University Press. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Lionnet, Françoise and Shih, Shu-mei (eds.). *Minor Transnationalism*. 2005.



Although her family has been in Osaka for three generations, Oh has never been *fully* Japanese, from her passport to her own perception of self. Existing in the category of “forever foreign” is often what it means to be a Zainichi Korean.<sup>4</sup> Around half a million ethnic Koreans live permanently in Japan and are known as Zainichi Koreans, irrespective of whether they have citizenship or not, or for how many generations they have been settled in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

Oh’s doubled identity is a historical marker of the Empire of Japan’s colonial control over the Korean Peninsula from 1910-1945. Japan’s *kōminka* assimilation policies pressured Korean imperial subjects to take Japanese names (*sōshi kaimēi*) as part of widespread forced “Japanization” that took place in the mid 1930s.<sup>6</sup> After the war, Koreans were able to restore their original names, but many Zainichi Koreans chose to retain their Japanese names to avoid discrimination in Japanese society. Oh’s decision to use her Korean name publicly in the late 1990s seems particularly daring, considering the tumultuous atmosphere in Japan at that time. Following the Shōwa Emperor Hirohito’s death in 1989, the nation underwent a postcolonial reckoning as debates about the nation’s aggression during the Asia Pacific War came to light after 50 years of silence—sparking a conservative backlash that further reinforced a lasting climate of historical revisionism and whitewashing.<sup>7</sup> As she began to share her background with more people, Oh realized that due to the silencing of memory, she and her Japanese peers were “mutually ignorant” of the complex history between Korea and Japan, which “cast a shadow on [her] private relationships.”<sup>8</sup>

It seems fitting that at such a contentious moment, the young artist began reflecting on her family’s migration to Japan. But when her grandmother passed away in 2001, Oh lost a crucial opportunity to learn the details of her journey, and from it, her larger family story. Why had her grandmother migrated to Japan from the small island of Jeju in the 1930s as a young teenager? How had that major shift impacted her life and what had it been like to “become Japanese” before, during, and after the war? And more immediately—what did all these unknowns mean for Oh’s life in the present?

The works selected for *Un / Weaving* demonstrate the elegant trajectory of the artist’s engagement with these questions over the past two decades. There are three distinct stages of her practice organized in the gallery space, which narrate the artist’s growth from the deeply personal, to the intentionally transnational, to Oh’s present attention to the entanglements of global movements, memories, and history.

<sup>4</sup> Zainichi (在日) literally means “residing in Japan.” Although the classification for Zainichi residency status does not only refer to Koreans, socially the term has become synonymous with the ethnic Korean population in Japan, including from both North and South Korea. The Korean Peninsula was divided during the Korean War, decades after the majority of migration had taken place.

<sup>5</sup> Ryang, Sonia and Lie, John. *Diaspora without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*. University of California Press. 2009.

<sup>6</sup> In both colonial Korea and Taiwan, the Empire of Japan’s *kōminka* policies were enforced between 1937-1945 during total war mobilization.

<sup>7</sup> A particularly controversial (and highly mediatized) topic is the Imperial Japanese military’s role in the system of sexual slavery known as “comfort women,” in which approximately 200,000 women, many of whom were Korean, were subjected to systemic sexual violence between 1932-1945.

<sup>8</sup> Oh, Haji. “What does the Ethnic Costume Represent?” *Asia Colloquia Papers*. 2011. pg. 4.

The artist's earliest works, created 20 years ago, document her grieving process and offer insights into her youthful curiosity as she searched for clues about her past by visiting her ancestral home of Jeju Island for the first time. Bringing images of Jeju into the gallery space in the US is evocative on multiple levels. Jeju, a tranquil, volcanic island to the southwestern tip of the Korean Peninsula, was the site of a massacre in 1948-49 while the island was still controlled by the United States Military Government in Korea following the end of Japanese colonial rule.<sup>9</sup>

During the struggle for control of the Korean peninsula, a leftist rebellion force was brutally suppressed due to US policy towards communism in the region.<sup>10</sup> As a result, tens of thousands of locals were massacred.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge and information about this massacre were completely suppressed by the South Korean government for 50 years, but among the Jeju Zainichi community in Japan, such as Oh's family, the violence was experienced with horror from across the sea and its memory was passed down through generations.<sup>12</sup> Oh's work does not directly touch on this history, but the tropical landscape of Jeju that appears in *Three Generations* (2004) and *Three Generations of Time* (2004), and the motif of the island in *Nautical Maps* (2017-Present) serve as ghostly reminders of this painful memory, and the implications of the US's role in this history. What must her grandmother have experienced, hearing about the atrocities committed in her homeland while living in Japan as a young woman?

Oh turned to the transnational as she progressed in her career, finding ways to engage with her grandmother's painful memories through the analogous stories of other communities. *Another Story* (2010) confronts Japanese-Canadian internment through the fictional narrative of a young woman starting to remember her experiences of the concentration camps she lived in as a child when her uncle passes away.<sup>13</sup> The resonance between Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* and Oh's own experience of losing her grandmother was the impetus of Oh's pivot from the personal towards larger stories of diasporic women who exist between national boundaries with multiple identities, much like herself as a Zainichi Korean.<sup>14</sup>

At present, Oh has taken on a more global lens. Her works have become monumental in size as her gaze and research have also expanded, delving into the geopolitical circumstances of transpacific movement with a focus on the overwhelming, but often overlooked, presence of migrant Asian labor in the region. Oh's newest series, *Seabird Habitatscapes* (2024) and the ongoing *grandmother island project* (2017-Present) demonstrate the culmination of

<sup>9</sup> The United States Military Government in Korea (USMGK) was the official ruling body of the southern half of the Korean Peninsula from 1945 until 1948 with the formation of the Republic of Korea. American troops withdrew in 1949.

<sup>10</sup> Ryang, Sonia. "Reading Volcano Island: in the Sixty-fifth Year of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising." *Asia Pacific Journal -Japan Focus*. Vol 11, No. 2. 2013. pp. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup> The exact number of victims is unknown. The South Korean government generally claims 14,000-30,000 casualties, while Jeju Zainichi communities put forward a figure closer to 80,000. At the time, Jeju's population was 270,000. Ryang, Sonia. "Reading Volcano Island: in the Sixty-fifth Year of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising." 2013. pg. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ryang, Sonia. "Reading Volcano Island: in the Sixty-fifth Year of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising." 2013 pg. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Toronto, ON: Penguin, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Oh's *Ama's Home / Boat Floating on Memory with the Color of Emptiness* (2018) traces the migration of female divers that moved along the archipelagic coastlines of islands between Jeju, Tsushima, Fukuoka, and Ishikawa. *House of Memory Traces* (2019) considers the experiences of war brides from Japan living in Australia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

the artist's aptitude for looking beyond national frameworks, for considering community formations that occupy liminal positions rendered invisible by widely understood notions of "national belonging."

As I write about Oh's artwork from within the emergent field of Transpacific Studies, a discipline that largely prioritizes movement and exchange between Asia and the US, Oh's recent work reminds me of poet, scholar, and activist Teresia Teaiwa's pertinent warning for researchers: *not to lose the center* in their focus on the geographical edges of the region. Teaiwa warned that if scholarship "continues to achieve its critical edge from the edges of the Pacific, its contributions to knowledge production will remain largely impotent, irrelevant, and unwelcome in the face-to-face realities of the islands."<sup>15</sup> Especially since moving to Australia in 2014, Oh has tapped into an elaborate, macro perspective of the Pacific region as a whole, moving past the edges to reveal the layers of history lost in between. Harnessing the nautical language of cartography, seafaring, and fishing communities, the artist searches for her place within new instances of collectivity that includes the thousands of islands that have always connected the seafaring routes of transpacific movement—*islands that have been subjected to the violence of resource extraction, settler colonialism, militarization, incarceration, and over-tourism for centuries.*

Seen in person, the physicality of Oh's labor-intensive art practice mirrors the perseverance experienced by diasporic communities—but the soft intricacy of her textile work opens up to audiences in unexpected ways. Without being direct and didactic, Oh draws out moments of tranquility from grief, creating beauty from anguish. New community can be created amongst Oh's works viewed together in the gallery space, as we are reminded that true belonging is determined by multiplicity, existences that have "no beginning or end; always in the middle, between things, *interbeing*."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Teaiwa, Teresia, "Lo(o)sing the Edge," in *Sweat and Salt Water: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2021. pg. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press; First edition. 1987. pp. 24-25. Author's emphasis.



## Object Descriptions

### *Three Generations*

*Three Generations* (2004) is one of Oh's most well-known works, created as part of her early *Costume as a Second Skin* series in the 2000s. At this time, the artist was grappling with the loss of her grandmother who passed away in 2001, leaving an absence of family history that Oh has gone on to explore in her body of work for the past two decades. Oh created *Three Generations* after she lived for two years in South Korea to learn about her ancestry and study the sewing and restoration of *chima chogori* (a traditional Korean dress) at the National Folk Museum in Seoul.<sup>1</sup>

Powerful in its simplicity, *Three Generations* draws on the vernacular of a family portrait, presenting three photographic self-portraits of the artist in a row of five wooden frames. Oh shot the film photographs in 2004 when she visited her family's ancestral home of Jeju Island for the first time. In each of the three portraits, Oh is pictured wearing a different *chima chogori*—first, her grandmother's white dress made of the white fabric popular among older generations; then her mother's in deep red; and finally a pink and yellow one that the artist sewed for herself by hand. For Oh, clothing and textile retain memories—becoming a second skin that carries the experiences of those who created and wore them. Donning her grandmother and mother's dresses in the island where her family came from, the artist embodies three generations of women in her family. The nostalgia of family portraiture draws viewers into a familiar space, while the repetition of Oh's portrait in traditional Korean dress actively interrupts the long-embedded

myth of Japanese ethnic homogeneity. Significantly, Oh left the two outer frames empty, representing the “unknowability” of those from the past and future.

By imaging herself in *Three Generations*, Oh reinforces the enduring existence of her family's lineage to Jeju Island, an act the artist has referred to as “the process of remembering (or actively not forgetting) the history of Korean residents in Japan, and passing on that history.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Three Generations of Time*

For *Three Generations of Time* (2004), Oh used a thermal transfer process to print a procession of self-portraits onto a long scroll of *sambe*, the hemp cloth traditionally used to dress and honor the dead at Korean funerals. The photographs were taken at the same time as Oh's work, *Three Generations* (2004), with the artist pictured wearing her grandmother's, mother's, and her own *chima chogori* into the tropical landscape of Jeju Island—her family's ancestral home in South Korea. The *sambe* cloth is the remaining swath of the original cloth that Oh's grandmother had prepared for use at her own funeral, imbuing the piece with her memories and life. By imaging her own figure on the meaningful cloth, Oh actively takes part in reconstructing memory, a salient part of familial mourning processes.

In each frame, Oh's clothing alternates between the three *chima chogori*, allowing a simple yet cryptic narrative to emerge. The artist cycles between her own (pink), her mother's (red), and her

<sup>1</sup> *Chima chogori* (치마저고리), usually spelled “chima jeogori” in the English transliteration of the traditional Korean garment, is often used interchangeably with the word hanbok in a Korean context. Oh intentionally uses the phrase and spelling *chima chogori*, transliterated from the Japanese katakana (チマ・チョゴリ), due to its culturally specific use and meaning amongst the Zainichi Korean community in Japan.

<sup>2</sup> Jennison, Rebecca. “Personal Geographies, Public Spaces: Contemporary Art on “the Borderlines” in Japan.” *Journal of Kyoto Seika University*. 2007. pp. 205–207.

grandmother's (white) dresses, producing a colorful stripe of images flowing horizontally for the length of the scroll. Although the saturated, tropical landscape of Jeju seems to seamlessly blend into an endless panoramic image behind her, Oh's body is contained in a loop—a recurring dream sequence with no clear beginning or end. She walks towards the viewer, surveys her surroundings, then turns to walk down a path to almost disappear into the landscape before returning again to the foreground. The “coming and going” rhetoric established by the narrative sequence evokes the precarity of geographical migration as well as the variability of memory over time. The small size of the photographic transfer allows Oh's face to remain anonymous, while drawing viewers in to look closely, creating an intimate space between the viewer's body and the ceremonial cloth.

### **Three Flowers**

*Three Flowers* (2004) combines Oh's memories of her grandmother and mother's experiences, contained in one colorful dress created out of her late grandmother's *chima chogori*. Oh carefully unraveled sections of her grandmother's two-piece garment, then re sewed it into one connected dress. Although she wasn't able to hear her grandmother's stories directly before she died, Oh felt she could weave her grandmother's unspoken memories through her own by creating works using her grandmother's belongings. The artist meticulously embroidered a delicate flower pattern through the original fabric of her grandmother's dress, and finished the work by brush-painting brightly colored flowers in red, pink, and blue dye on the inside of the dress. Oh chose to paint lotus flowers, as a nod to her mother's

experience growing up in Japan, where her teacher referred to her as *nenashigusa*—a plant with no roots, floating atop the water like a lotus.

Oh plays with the saturation of color as a device for evoking the different degrees of and layers of a memory. The dyed interior is visible through the sheer white fabric of the dress, forming a contrast between the muted exterior and the bright colors hidden beneath. When it is installed in space, the dress naturally falls open at certain points, drawing the viewers' gaze into the brighter folds of the garment's interior while simultaneously rendering it inaccessible. The fabric's sculptural structure is emphasized, mirroring the artist's understanding of memory as a three-dimensional space. The artist explains:

*When my grandmother passed away, my mother kept her chima chogori without disposing of it... One day, I strongly felt my grandmother's presence from it. The chogori held untold stories, the things my grandmother didn't speak about and I couldn't ask. I realized the dress harbored the 'silent memories.' I thought about tracing the history of a woman whose story remains untold, through this chogori.<sup>4</sup>*

### **Another Story**

*Another Story* (2010) is a multimedia sculptural work created after Oh lived in Toronto from 2008-09 as a visiting scholar at York University and intern at the Textile Museum of Canada. At the time, she had been striving to find new ways to engage with the complexity of memory in her work, and found unexpected answers while reading Joy Kogawa's

<sup>4</sup>Matsuoka, Rie. “Oh Haji-san—Zainichi korian to shite no aidentiti kara umareta, sehitsuna sekai [Haji Oh—A tranquil world born from her identity as a Zainichi Korean].” *THE BIG ISSUE JAPAN*. Iss. 159. 2011.

novel *Obasan* (1983) about a Japanese-Canadian woman retracing her family's memories of incarceration and the transnational impacts of WWII. From 1942-49, Canada forcibly relocated and incarcerated 22,000 people of Japanese descent from the west coast for the sake of "national security," regardless of their citizenship status. While fictional, Kogawa's vivid first-person depictions of the challenges faced by different generations of Japanese-Canadian women before and after the war prompted Oh to recall the experiences of her grandmother and mother living as Koreans in Japan. She "sensed a universal narrative in the novel... a story of and for people who, in response to powerful forces, crossed borders."<sup>3</sup>

Taking care not to generalize the hardships faced, Oh considered the commonalities among immigrant communities, including unspoken memories, generational trauma, and discrimination. For *Another Story*, she invited 41 women, including her mother and sister, to read excerpts from a chapter of *Obasan* that takes the form of letters written by the main character's aunt as she describes her experiences in Canada before and during WWII. The intermingling voices of women reading in English and Japanese produce a fragmented yet evocative narrative in the exhibition space—giving expression to an overlooked period of Canadian history while also engendering connections to other stories. This experiment in reading is accompanied by a soft sculpture created out of jute rope, which Oh tenderly unraveled to create the motif of an open book. Even as the jute sculpture appears to be light and fragile, its stillness evokes a compelling sense of heaviness.

Oh considers the unraveling of textile as a way to deconstruct texts, a process *Another Story* explores through visual and auditory representations of intergenerational storytelling. The process of reading *Obasan*, akin to the tactile experience of handling textile fibers, stirs memories for the artist. The textural material and its flexible, yet three-dimensional form also resemble the structure of retrieving a memory. Memories attached to the women's voices almost seem to be extracted from the pages of the book as the loose and fibrous structure of the pages are re-coiled into a long braid, resonant of braided hair. Oh calls further attention to the various ways in which she bundled and retwisted the unraveled material, using tightly-wrapped red silk yarn to create moments of brightness in the otherwise subdued color of the jute.

### *Untitled*

*Untitled* (2019) is part of a larger series entitled *A House of Memory Traces*, the third chapter of Oh's ongoing *grand-mother island project* (2017-Present), which traces the memories of migrants across the Pacific. *A House of Memory Traces* follows the memories of war brides who emigrated from Japan after the second world war. *Untitled* is the only figurative piece included in *A House of Memory Traces*, hanging high above the viewer to form the vague silhouette of a woman's body, with a long braid falling to the floor as it unravels like a memory lost to time.

*Untitled* makes clear the variety of labor-intensive approaches Oh has to weaving, as well as the importance of unraveling as a metaphor for deconstructing memory. Starting from spools of

<sup>3</sup>Haji, Oh. "Oh Haji's Letter Collection," in *Inner Voices*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa [catalog]. Toshiya Yasui: Tokyo. 2011. pg 137.



black warp threads leading loosely upwards to where the artist has woven them into a flat textile, the work demonstrates the importance of the four-selvage edge in textile works. Four-selvage cloth refers to textile made with a self-finishing edge that prevents it from unraveling or fraying on all four sides. The woven part of *Untitled* ends abruptly and tapers off with only the warp threads leading down to the floor; the material appears to be weighted down as the artist condenses it into a thick braid, eventually cascading onto the floor in a disassembled heap, creating palpable tension that contrasts the whimsical feeling of the threads unwinding from the spools. Oh plays with making and un-making in this piece, harnessing the shifts in texture and empty spaces between the threads as a visible reminder of the nonlinear, gap-filled process of passing down transnational histories.

### ***Spiral History – TIDE***

The exhibition includes the seven cyanotypes Oh created for *Spiral History – TIDE* (2023), a zine developed in collaboration with writer/translator Michiyo Miyake. As a creative duo, Oh and Miyake are known as “textus.”

*Spiral History – TIDE* documents the history of the islands where Australia’s offshore immigration detention centers are located, connecting stories of labor migration, imperialism, and incarceration between Australia, Japan, and the islands across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Australia’s detention centers continue to be in use today and have long been subject to controversy for their inhumane conditions. The zine textus created in collaboration specifically examines the history of the detention centers during two periods of intense population—

the peak of the phosphate mining industry in the 19th century, and the Imperial Japanese occupation of the islands during WWII.

For this collaborative project, Oh created cyanotypes of archival images from the National Library of Australia, applying the cameraless technique to paper and woven linen. The unpredictability of the cyanotype printing process makes the works precarious and hard to discern, much like the “bare lives” of incarcerated, refugees, and asylum seekers who have been held in Australia’s detention centers over the years.

Made up of four images, *Los Negros Island 1949* (2022) depicts aerial views of Lombrum Naval Base, an air base built by Korean and Japanese labor during the Japanese occupation of Manus Island (now Papua New Guinea), used as a brutal detention center in the early 1950s. In *Phosphate fields* (2022), *Landscape of Lagoon in Nauru* (2023), and *Aerial photography, Momote* (2022), the artist’s cyanotyping process completely abstracted the archival imagery, producing obscure but highly textural patterns reminiscent of warp print ikat patterns. In *Phosphate fields in Banaba Island* (2022), *Mother Mountain* (2023), and *Road in PNG and railway tracks in Christmas Island* (2023), the strong horizon line of the landscape allows the images to retain their realism to a certain extent, bringing forth the motif of connected landscapes also present in Oh’s *Nautical Maps* series.

*without names, without freedom  
or any form of agency over their own lives.  
a state of being deprived of  
the right to have rights,  
identified and controlled by  
number and barcode.  
lives without legal protection,  
identity suspended.  
a state of being nobody;  
how long can the human spirit endure that?  
Prolonged detention with no end in sight,  
even prayer abandoned.  
those who once paddled out into the night sea  
risking their lives have forgotten how to dream.*

- Excerpt from “V,” Michiyo Miyake,  
*Spiral History - TIDE*.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Nautical Map series***

*Textile as a map-mt.k #2* (2023), *Textile as a map-t.i #2* (2023), and *Textile as a map-j.i #2* (2023) are the newest additions to the artist’s *Nautical Map* series (2017-Present), a return to the first chapter of Oh’s ongoing *grand-mother island project* (2017-Present), which traces the memories of migrants across the Pacific. The woven works in *Nautical Map* harness the familiar motif of landscape to conceptualize intimate connections between faraway lands. For these three works, Oh moves beyond the confines of the nation-state by placing locations she holds near into conversation with each other. Mount Keira (*Textile as a map-mt.k #2*), an island near Oh’s current home in Wollongong Australia is linked to Oh’s ancestral homeland of Jeju Island, South Korea (*Textile as a map-j.i #2*); which are both then

linked to Thursday Island (*Textile as a map-t.i #2*), a small island between Australia and Papua New Guinea where many Japanese immigrants labored in the pearling industry. A new form of cartography is created, not by charts and geographies, but instead by memory and shared experiences of diasporic existences connected by oceans.

For these works, Oh employed her own backstrap weaving method, inspired by traditional Guatemalan backstrap weaving techniques that she learned from a teacher she met during her studies at Kyoto City University of the Arts. Oh painted and dyed the woven linen threads using black sumi ink and bleach, a process which left layers of color similar to a landscape emerging from the mist. In her weaving process, Oh considers the interlacing of the threads (warp and weft) to be analogous to the fabric of space and time, so that each layer of woven thread represents the past in the present: “*The fabric is flat, but once unraveled, a three-dimensional space inflated with air emerges. Exploring this space suggests what exists, what existed, and what can exist between threads.*”<sup>5</sup>

In the repetitive process of backstrap weaving, the artist must use her own body to control the tension of the warp threads. This method is highly portable, and as such is a traditional craft that resonates within migrant communities. The medium itself also blurs national boundaries—weaving is an ancient technique that has been developed by transnational movement around the world, including between Japan, Korea, and Australia.

<sup>4</sup>Miyake, Michiyo. “Guano Dream 1890s-1920s” and “Japanese Occupation 1940s” in *Spiral History - TIDE*. Self-published zine by textus, Haji Oh and Michiyo Miyake. 2023. pg 7-8, 20-21.

<sup>5</sup>Oh, Haji. Presentation notes for the Tokyo Contemporary Art Award. November 2023.

Previous versions of *Nautical Maps* have taken the form of temporary installations, but the artist intentionally framed these three new works to make them portable, bringing these three meaningful locations around the world.

### ***Seabird Habitatscape #1 - Bunda Lagoon and Mother Mountain***

*Seabird Habitatscape #1 - Bunda Lagoon and Mother Mountain* (2024) is the first of Oh's new site-specific series, *Seabird Habitatscape* (2024-Present). For this new series, Oh critically disrupts the colonial vernacular of western cartography, conceptually remapping the islands of the Pacific by tracing the extraction of resources that brought migrant laborers from all over the world to the region. By following phosphate mining, pearl diving, immigration detention centers, and military bases as a historical lens, Oh's research traces the shifting control of German, British, and Antipodean imperialisms that brought waves of migrants from China, Malaysia, and India laboring under western powers, as well as Korean and Japanese laborers during Japan's military occupation of the region during World War II. Many descendants are still based in Oceania, forming an extensive diasporic community that is rendered invisible by national histories.

Enticingly beautiful, the intricacy of Oh's dreamy textile installation immediately pulls viewers in to take a closer look at the artist's labor-intensive approach—both in craft and research. Juxtaposed with a faded projection of an archival British map of the Pacific from 1798, the artist's interconnected blue textiles offer atmospheric views of Nauru and Papua New Guinea's tropical landscapes, cyanotyped using

filmic transparencies collaged from archival images and Oh's photography. Oh combined cyanotype and *hogushigasuri* (warp printing ikat) to slowly bring the landscapes into view using a tactile, meticulous process that took the artist months to complete. For the *hogushigasuri* technique, the artist loosely weaves the textile in order to print the image onto it, before unraveling it completely and starting the weaving process over. The alternating layers of loom weaving pull the unprinted threads forward to mingle with the cyanotyped threads, creating an atmospheric effect that gives the landscape a depth similar to what is found in painting and photography. Oh manipulates warp threads during the weaving process to introduce variable textures, spaces, and gaps, bringing attention to the distinct variations textile carries as a sculptural form. Over the course of making the work, the artist applied the cyanotype emulsion and exposure process four times, the layers of which can be observed at the edges of each panel, ebbing like the tides of the ocean or silhouette of mountains. Through this cyanotyping process, the image progressively comes into sharper focus, just like the recollection of a memory.

Installed for the first time in the gallery space, *Seabird Habitatscape #1* is held in tension even as it softly sways. The original linen warp threads activate the piece from floor to ceiling, extending the viewer's gaze to anchoring points and subtle shadows that serve to narrate a new understanding of history.



## Press Release

*“I regard weaving and unraveling as ways to evoke the existence of silent memory, introducing my own concepts and ideas and creating spaces to stimulate people’s imagination.”*

- Haji Oh, 2023

**Alison Bradley Projects** is proud to announce *Un / Weaving*, the debut solo exhibition of **Haji Oh** in the United States, curated by **Eimi Tagore-Erwin**. Oh (b. Osaka, 1976) is a third generation Zainichi Korean artist, born and raised in Japan, now based in Wollongong, Australia. Oh developed her own unique approach to the medium by incorporating traditional Korean sewing techniques, Japanese *kasuri* (ikat), *hoshigasuri* (warp printing ikat), and Guatemalan backstrap loom weaving. *Un / Weaving* showcases a selection of 15 artworks representative of Oh’s oeuvre, surveying the artist’s dynamic experimentations with textile as she has traced memory and migration through weaving, dyeing, stitching, photography, and cyanotype.

Oh’s extensive body of work gives expression to the inevitable silences that occur amongst diasporic communities that don’t easily fit into national histories. Drawing from the Latin word *texere*, meaning “to weave,” Oh likens the process of creating textiles to composing a text—she weaves threads together to compose the structural space of memories that have been overlooked and forgotten, opening them up to the present.

Stemming from her grandmother’s migration to Japan from Jeju Island, South Korea, in the 1930s, Oh’s early works combine portraiture and textile to reimagine the “unknowability” of her ancestral past. Due to generational distance, significant chapters of her family’s immigration story were lost when her grandmother passed away in 2001. Oh learned traditional sewing techniques in South Korea in order to reflect upon her identity as a Korean in Japan, the un verbalized memories of her grandmother, and unresolved questions about her inherited past. The artist has since expanded her work to include the voices of overlooked migrant communities of the Pacific, mirroring her own transpacific travels. In 2008, she traveled to Canada as a visiting scholar of York University and interned at the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto, leading her to create mixed media works about the experiences of incarcerated Japanese-Canadian women during WWII, with immersive sound components in both English and Japanese. Oh moved to Australia in 2014, where her work gained a more global perspective and she began her ongoing *grand-mother island project* series, which traces the inherited and lost stories of migrant labor communities that have crossed the Pacific Ocean. The exhibition includes three chapters of this project, including the first of Oh’s new site-specific *Seabird Habitatscapes* series. Reconceptualizing the landscapes of islands that pepper the Pacific, this new series reflects on the interconnectedness of resource extraction, imperialism, and migration in a bold culmination of Oh’s experimentation with media.

Oh has spent two decades creating works that blur the framework of national boundaries, highlighting the liminality of transpacific movement and the way that these movements are often erased by history. Her body of work shifts seamlessly between the personal and global, but throughout, the memory of her grandmother is deeply influential—as a grounding figure and as a metaphor for inherited pasts.

Alison Bradley Projects is honored to bring Oh’s striking works to a wider audience in New York. In a city brimming with powerful, diasporic stories, Oh’s work gains new meaning. *Un / Weaving: Haji Oh* is accompanied by an online catalog authored by Eimi Tagore-Erwin.

**Haji Oh** is a Zainichi Korean artist from Osaka (b. 1976), living and working in Wollongong, Australia and Japan. An accomplished international textile and fiber artist, Oh studied Dyeing and Weaving at the Kyoto City University of the Arts, receiving her MA in 2002 and PhD in 2012. She was recently awarded the Tokyo Contemporary Art Award (TCAA) for 2024-2026 and named as a finalist for the ANTEPRIMA x Center for Heritage Arts and Textile (CHAT) Contemporary Textile Art Prize.

Oh’s recent exhibitions include *KANTEN: 観展 The Limits of History*, apexart, New York 2023; *Roppongi Crossing: Coming & Going*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo 2022-23; *TEXTURE*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space 2023; *Publicness of the Art Center*, Art Tower Mito, Japan 2019-2020; *Memories in Weaving*, Oyama City Kurumaya Museum of Art, Japan 2019; *Kanazawa: Altering Home*, Neighborhoods in Kanazawa City; and *Wearing Memory*, University of Wollongong, 2015. She received the Han Chang-Woo-Tetsu Cultural Foundation Grant in 2011, and has completed artist residencies at Art Tower Mito and Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Japan; and Bundanon and University of Wollongong, Australia.

## Weaving Stripes with Haji Oh

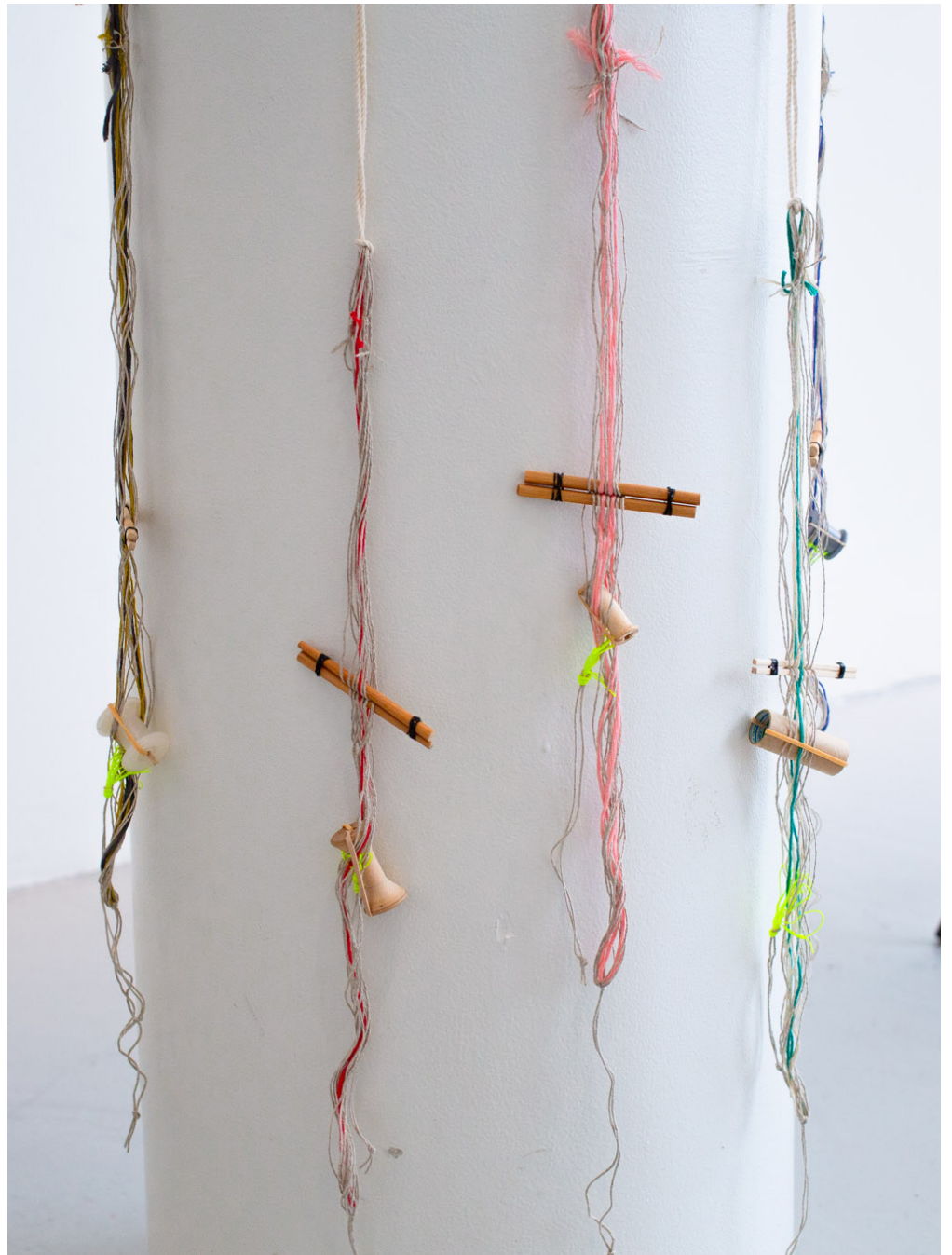
Oh has incorporated the idea of “workshops as research” into her artistic practice since 2010, starting with her reading workshop for *Another Story* (2010). The artist believes that during workshops, a reciprocal relationship is created between the artist and the audience, in which the boundary between participant and observer is blurred.

As part of *Un / Weaving*, the curator organized an artist-led backstrap weaving workshop called ***Weaving Stripes with Haji Oh***.

The workshop brought together a community of New York-based creatives to the gallery for a rare chance to learn about the structure of the backstrap weaving loom from the artist herself. Backstrap weaving is a technique in which weavers must adjust the tension of the warps by using their bodies as they weave. Warps are rolled around two rods; one is attached to a strap worn around the weaver’s waist, and the other is tied to pillars for stability. The stripe pattern created during this workshop is one of the most characteristic patterns of backstrap weaving due to its structure, which allows for the creation of alternating colors and textures.

During the workshop, participants gained insights into Oh’s labor-intensive practice—the physical rigor required of using your own body and the meticulous attention to detail necessary for creating even just a single stripe.





Photographs by TJ Perrin







## CV

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *Memories in Weaving*, Kurumaya Museum of Art, Oyama City, Tochigi, Japan  
2017 *The imaginary landscape – grandmother island*, MATSUO MEGUMI +Voice Gallery pfs/w, Kyoto, Japan  
2015 *Wearing Memory*, ver. Wollongong, TAEM Gallery at University of Wollongong, Australia  
2014 *Wearing Memory*, Koganei Art Spot Chateau 2F, Tokyo, Japan  
2013 *OH Haji × Aomori City Archives "Gestures in Clothing,"* Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Aomori, Japan  
2010 *Dwelling of Memory*, Shibakawa Building, Osaka, Japan  
2008 *Slipping Through the Texture – The Moment of Silence – From the Journey in the Philippines*, Voice Gallery pfs/w, Kyoto, Japan  
2006 *Memory*, Voice Gallery pfs/w, Kyoto, Japan  
2001 *Roots*, Voice gallery, Kyoto, Japan

### Group Exhibitions

- 2023 *KANTEN 観展: The Limits of History*, apexart, New York, USA  
*Texture*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, Australia  
2022 *Roppongi Crossing 2022, Coming & Going*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan  
*Nuno no Tsubasa*, Somé Seiryukan, Kyoto, Japan  
2020 *Grandmother's Life, Tracing the Passage of Memories*, Koganei Art Spot Chateau 2F, Japan  
2019 *Publicness of the Art Center*, Art Tower of Mito, Ibaraki, Japan  
2018 *Altering Home: Culture Cities of East Asia 2018: Kanazawa*, Kanazawa, Japan  
2017 *Binding Threads / Expanding Threads – The Art of Creating "Between-ness,"* Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan  
*Everyday Life – Sigh of Awareness*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Ishikawa, Japan  
2016 *Pojagi as a Portrait – with Haji Oh's Photograph Works*, Crafts of Korean Peninsula, Kurumaya Museum of Art, Oyama City, Japan  
2014 *Going, Going, Until I Meet the Tide*, Busan Biennale, Kiswire Factory, Korea  
*ex-pots 2011 – 2013*, Breaker Project, Enoco and Kioku Shugei-kan Tansu, Osaka, Japan  
2012 *VOCA – Vision of Contemporary Art 2012*, The Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo, Japan  
2011 *Inner Voices*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Ishikawa, Japan  
2010 *We love books! International Book Art Picnic*, Nakanoshima Library, Osaka, Japan  
2009 *HOME*, Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Aomori, Japan  
*Winter Energy*, Lennox Contemporary, Toronto, Canada  
2008 *HIROSHIMA ART DOCUMENT 2008*, The Former Bank of Japan, Hiroshima Branch, Atom-Bombed Construction, Hiroshima, Japan

- 2007 *Young Artist Selective Exhibition*, The Museum of Kyoto, Kyoto, Japan
- 2006 *NIPPON vs. FINE ART – Striving for Identity in the Context of Western Art*, Osaka City Museum of Modern Art, Shinsaibashi Temporary Exhibition Space, Osaka, Japan
- 2006 *√roots*, Ho-nen in Temple, Kyoto, Japan
- 2005 *Zone-Poetic Moment*, Tokyo Wonder Site, Tokyo, Japan  
*Orienteer*, Hong Kong Fringe Club, Hong Kong
- 2004 *Orienteer*, Kyoto Art Center, Kyoto, Japan
- 2002 *Several Situations: Kyoto Style Lab*, 02, Kyoto Art Center, Kyoto, Japan

### **Selected Publications & Exhibition Catalogues**

- Shim, S., 2021, “Unravelling Place: Oh Haji’s Textile Work Nautical Map,” *TASSA REVIEW*, vol. 30, no.4, pp. 12-14.
- Jennison, R., 2020, “Contact Zones and Liminal Spaces in Okinawa and Zainichi Contemporary Art,” *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas (ADVA)*. vol.6, pp. 11-26.
- Jennison, R., 2017, “Reimagining Islands: Notes on Selected Works by Oh Haji, Soni Kum, and Yamashiro Chikako,” *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas (ADVA)*. 3, 1-2, pp.155-177.
- Jennison, R., 2015, “Postmemory” in the Work of Oh Haji and Soni Kum,” in *Still Hear the Wound: Toward an Asia, Politics, and Art to Come*. Cornell East Asia Series. pp. 115-133.
- Jin, E.-Y. & Shim, Bo Seon., 2015, “The Politics and Aesthetics of the Wound: Performative Narratives of the People by Zainichi Korean Artists,” *Korea Journal*. vol.55, pp. 86-111.
- Jennison, R., 2007, “Personal Geographies, Public Space: Contemporary Art on the Borderlines in Japan,” *Journal of Kyoto Seika University*. vol 33, 京都精華大学紀要』第33号, pp. 194-217.

### **Awards**

- Tokyo Contemporary Art Award, 2024 – 2026
- ANTEPRIMA x Center for Heritage Arts and Textile, Contemporary Textile Art Prize Finalist, 2024
- Han Chang-Woo-Tetsu Cultural Foundation Grant, 2011
- Korean Scholarship Foundation, 2007 – 2010
- Young Artist Selective Exhibition, The Museum of Kyoto, 2007, Jury Recommendation by Motoaki Shinohara

### **Residencies**

- Bundanon, Australia, May 2022
- Art Tower Mito, Japan, April – May 2019
- University of Wollongong, Australia, June – August 2015
- Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Japan, September – December 2009

## Artwork References

### *Another Story*

Audio reference: Joy Kogawa. Obasan. Toronto, ON: Penguin, 1983 [1981].

### *Los Negros Island 1949*

Image references: at the upper left: Murray, J. K. (Jack Keith), Sir, 1889-1980 (1949). Aerial view of Lombrum naval base, Los Negros Island, Papua New Guinea, Sep 1949. Jack Keith Murray Collection, UQFL91, Album 2, item 93. Image reference at the upper right: Murray, J. K. (Jack Keith), Sir, 1889-1980 (1949). Aerial view of Lombrum naval base, Los Negros Island, Papua New Guinea, Sep 1949. Jack Keith Murray Collection, UQFL91, Album 2, item 88. Image reference at the lower left: Murray, J. K. (Jack Keith), Sir, 1889-1980 (1949). Aerial view of Lombrum naval base, Los Negros Island, Papua New Guinea, Sep 1949. Jack Keith Murray Collection, UQFL91, Album 2, item 90. Image reference at the lower right: Murray, J. K. (Jack Keith), Sir, 1889-1980 (1949). Aerial view of Lombrum naval base, Los Negros Island, Papua New Guinea, Sep 1949. Jack Keith Murray Collection, UQFL91, Album 2, item 91.

### *Phosphate fields*

Image reference: 193-?, Phosphate workings - a worked out field, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-143785169

### *Aerial photography, Momote*

Image reference: 1966, Momote Qasco Air Surveys, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-649176776

### *Phosphate fields in Banaba Island*

Image reference: 192-?, Phosphate fields, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-139542001

### *Landscape of Lagoon in Nauru*

Image reference: 193-?, One of Nauru's beauty spots - a corner of the Buada Lagoon, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-143784867

### *Mother Mountain*

Image reference: Blanche Bay and Rabaul township with Mother Mountain, New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea, approximately 191-?, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-152972214

### *Road in PNG and railway tracks in Christmas Island*

Image reference at the left: Road around Blanche Bay, Rabaul, New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea, approximately 1916, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-152967114

Image references at the right: National Library of Australia, nla.obj-152967114 and nla.obj-2442073609



## Artwork References

*Seabird Habitatscape #1 - Bunda Lagoon and Mother Mountain*

Image reference at the left: 193-?, One of Nauru's beauty spots - a corner of the Buada Lagoon, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-143784867

Image reference at the right: Approximately 1916, Mother Mountain, New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-152966813

Projection reference: Chart of the Pacific Ocean, 1798, by Aaron Arrowsmith, The Collection of the State Library of NSW

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