

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Artist as an itinerant secret keeper

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Secrets are such amazing creatures. Kept inside us, there's little telling what they'll do. Let out, even less. They test our trust in others and in ourselves and the limits of curiosity.

They're not lies, exactly. The cousins of lies. Not the misrepresentation of the truth, but the deliberate concealment of it.

In a radically open, public society such as ours, what is more delicious than the secret, the private and forbidden? They make voyeurs of us all. The great power inside every secret is the threat of revelation, yet, paradoxically, that power vanishes in its own enactment, like a bee dying when it stings, for a secret, once known, is secret no more.

Secrets can be a valuable resource, one we may guard with our lives, yet they seem to have a will and temper of their own, volatile, and if they want to come out, if they need to come out, they will build and build painfully inside of us until they blow. Often, ironically, to good effect.

For these and many other reasons, Yoshiko Shimada's exhibition at The Print Studio in Hamilton is full of strange and beautiful power.

Called *Bones In Tansu: Family Secrets*, the show consists of photo-based prints and collage with text, concealed in the drawers of furniture.

Tansu are Japanese stacks of drawers, and in the Print Studio version of the exhibition, there is a dark wooden one mounted on the wall and a traditional western chest of drawers as well.

In all of the drawers lie secrets, hinted at vaguely in photographs and photo-based prints, often dim, faded and bleary, sometimes almost unrecognizably so.

Laid over the prints are acetates and other screens on which the text appears, handwritten, revealing some personal fragment, the secret. The secrets are varied, both in tone and content, from shame to anger, from the personal to the historical, from deep hurt and tragedy to bewilderment and ennui, most in some way poignant.

One text fragment says: "... five years in mental hospital. Now I live a normal life. I was just being myself but they put me behind the wall."

Another says: "My brother, 46, unmarried, unemployed, hides in his room over 20 years."

Yet another secret teller reveals the growing fear that the writer will "do nothing of great importance" in his or her life.

Where does Shimada find these secrets? People bring them to her, often at shows like the one at The Print Studio. They are invited to write them down.

At The Print Studio there is a grey metal box in which visitors to the show are invited to place their secrets, as though in a ballot box. Strictly anonymous.

The ones in the current show come from other versions of *Bones in Tansu: Family Secrets* that Shimada has put on all over the world.



Ted Brellisford, the Hamilton Spectator

There are allusions in the show to Nazi pasts and kamikaze suicide and to issues of homosexuality, incest, eating disorders and abuse.

The drawers, as art, are evocative set pieces, made up in a mysterious visual poetry of painted bones, lace, wallpaper and other such details and documentary materials that suggest memory, character, and history, both personal and political.

For Shimada, the concept for the show grew out of her interest in how artists routinely reveal their innermost selves.

"Artists show their secrets with so much intimacy," says Shimada. "I wanted to do something that was an artistic intervention between our public and private lives."

An internationally renowned printmaker from Tokyo, Shimada was in Hamilton on a three-week visit until Sunday, at the invitation of The Print Studio.

During her stay, she worked on several prints, installed her show, and gave several lectures.

She has been in Toronto three times, but this is her first visit to Hamilton.

She says it reminds her of Glasgow in Scotland.

Shimada grew up in Japan and, she recalls, always wanted to be an artist, but it was not until she travelled to California to attend university that she discovered printmaking and knew that was what she wanted to do.

It was a coup for The Print Studio to get her here because Shimada is invited to residencies all over the world -- recently she spent months in London.

It seems sometimes, she jokes, that she is only ever in Japan to repack to go somewhere else.

Partly because of her American training and partly because of her extensive travels, she is familiar with most printmaking traditions. Ironically, she says, the print medium she's least familiar with is the one most associated with Japan -- wood block.

Shimada's Bones in Tansu: Family Secrets is on at The Print Studio, 173 James St. N., until June 6.

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