

SHINKICHI TAJIRI
UNIVERSAL PARADOXES

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EDITED BY

HELEN WESTGEEST

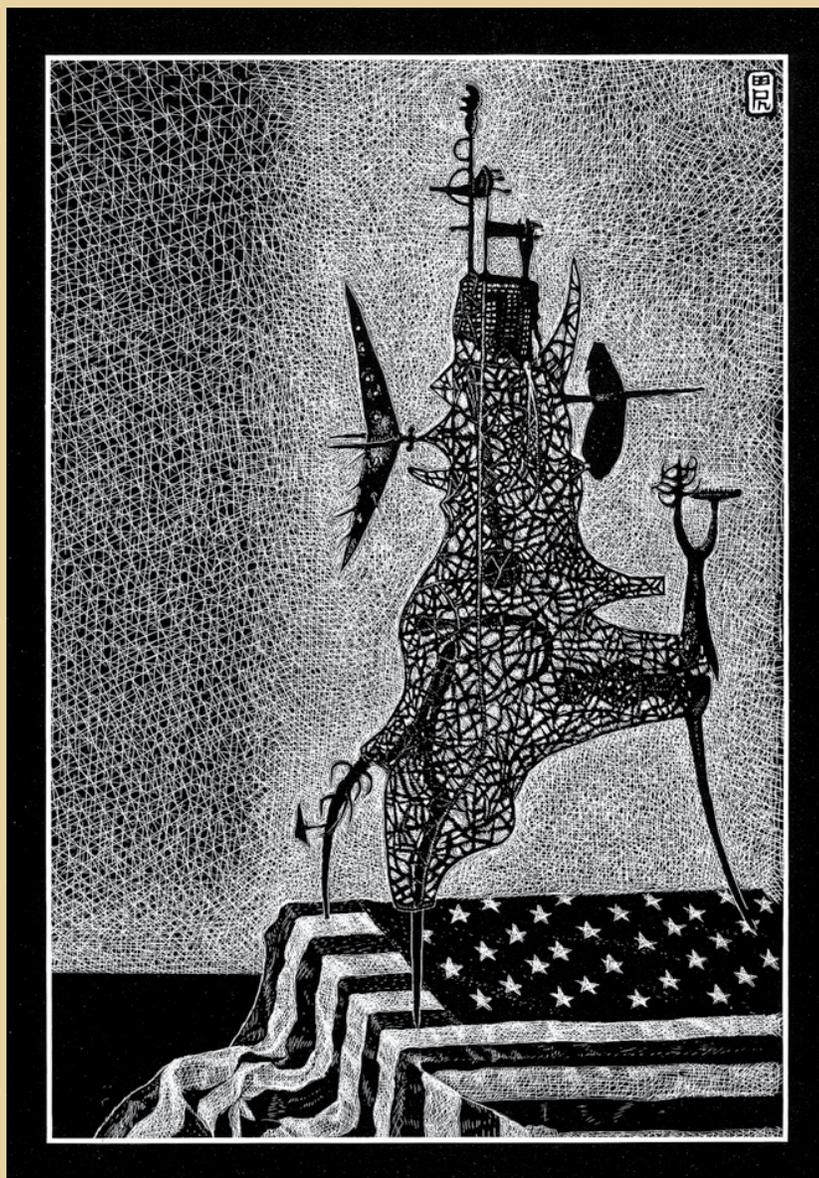
GIOTTA TAJIRI

RYU TAJIRI

LEIDEN PUBLICATIONS

ON EXILE: TAJIRI'S AMERICA

PAUL M. FARBER



Wounded Knee 1953.

All the following engravings (scraperboard drawings) were made for the catalog of the retrospective show at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, and the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, in 1974.

“The task for the exile, especially the exiled artist, is to transform the figure of rupture back into a figure of connection.”

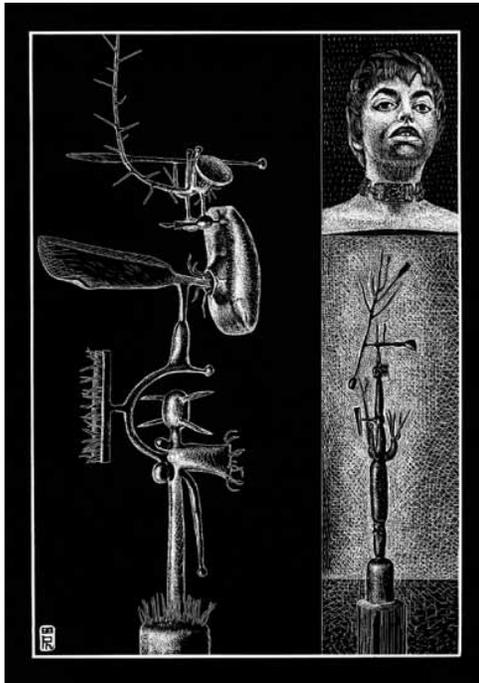
— MICHAEL SEIDEL

“[Tajiri’s] self-imposed exile is part of Shinkichi’s karma without which he would not be who he is today. An alchemist if there ever was one, he has transmuted these base metals into an extraordinary and diverse gold mine.”

— KENNETH SNELSON

“During my first encounter with new students, I would tell them to see themselves as archeologists... their terrain will be themselves.”

— SHINKICHI TAJIRI



Carnivorous Plant 1957, (right) *Warrior* 1957,
(above) *Ferd* ca. 1955.

At age 70, when Shinkichi Tajiri published his *Autobiographical Notations*, he reflected simply on his location: “Today, by preference, I stay close to the castle.”¹ In a retrospective book that charted Tajiri’s lineages and adventured pathways of art, from his reflections on his ancestral Japan, to his estranged homeland of America, to his longtime Dutch dwellings, the destination of his narrative found the artist in both a place and time of arrival. From 1962 onward, his rehabilitated Castle Scheres, which sat on a five-acre plot in rural Holland, was the epicenter of Tajiri’s work and life. He produced sculptures in his multi-room studio above his foundry, raised his children and grandchildren behind its walls, entertained international guest artists and scholars, and transformed its ruined structure and landscape into a place of supreme imagination. This was ultimately his *Gesamtwerk*, his myth, and his home.

Before entering through the front door of the castle, visitors would encoun-

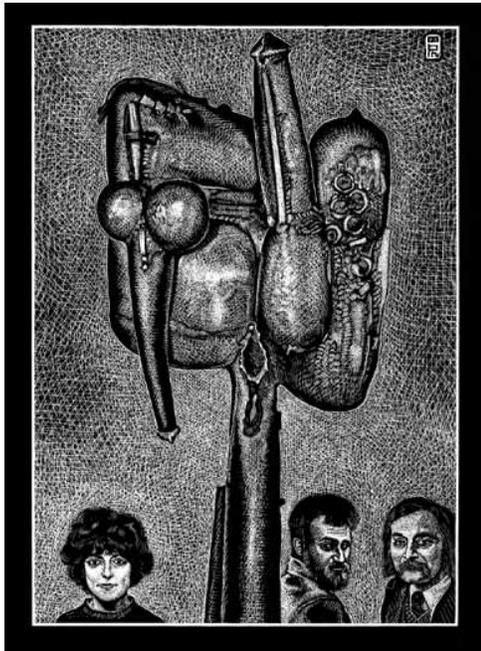
ter the Tajiri family crest, an encircled, five-pointed star painted in gold, like a medieval weapon or blooming flower. This emblem was stamped at the entry, and can be seen otherwise throughout the residence and the artist’s oeuvre alike, marking his intertwined life-long quest for identity through creativity, tradition, and place. This crest was a symbol, like the castle, of a hard fought for vision of steadfastness. As a warrior artist, Tajiri sought out meditations on his fragile relationship with the concepts of home and nation to ground himself.

Other than the family’s castle, the most defining location of Tajiri’s career was not a place but a state of limbo – his “self-imposed exile” from his home country of the United States, which he left in 1948. Despite several artist residencies and visits to family or friends that brought him back to the States, he never returned there to live. He went on to reside in Paris, Amsterdam, and Baarlo, but held onto his American passport throughout his life. Tajiri was a samurai in a space of suspension, searching for meaning through critical distance.



The Explosive Forces of Nature 1961, AKU
Fountain Monument, Arnhem. Fuyo Kikuta-Tajiri,
ca. 1941.

¹ Tajiri 1993, p. 76.



Manscape 1960, Suzanne van der Capellen, Karl Kleimann, Leo Marks.

His exit from America was self-appointed but deeply compelled by divisive political sentiments. Reading themes that cut across Tajiri's monumental works – including intricate bronze fortresses and towers carved from brick molds, large metal war machines with giant legs and protruding weaponry, assemblages from metal drippings, photographic explorations, and oversized hardened fiberglass and polyester knots – he persisted with the tendency to keep America as a clear subject. Many of Tajiri's sculptures created in his period of exile were intended reflections on the relationship between violence, militarism and technological advancement through the Cold War. However, the U.S. was only an occasional site for his work. He viewed his country of origin from afar but with a posture of engaged and wary critique.² Ultimately, Tajiri's exile was a protective but a decisive form of self-realization.

Specters of American war and division followed Tajiri throughout his life. He was the son of Japanese immigrants,

with samurai bloodlines, and born in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles on December 7, 1923. He turned 18 years old on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Less than a year later, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 calling for the removal of circa 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent from their homes, the Tajiri family resided in San Diego within a designated civilian “exclusion zone.” With this executive order, the Tajiris were subject to forced relocation. Failure to leave voluntarily would result in criminal charges. Within days, the family was removed from their home and told they had to leave most of their belongings behind. (The Tajiris later lost their home, a fact that haunted Shinkichi and defined much of his work.) They were first transported to Santa Anita race-track's makeshift, cordoned-off facilities for five months, and then to the Poston 3 Relocation Camp in the Arizona desert. There, they endured in an American internment camp. Months later, after being given an option for interned Japanese American citizens to join the war efforts in order to gain freedom from the camps, Shinkichi enlisted.³ He went for basic training in Shelby, Mississippi, a town under Jim Crow rule, and joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of Nisei soldiers.

On May 1, 1944, Tajiri shipped out to join the war effort in Europe within his segregated unit, led by white officers. Shortly thereafter, Tajiri was seriously wounded in combat in Italy. After he convalesced for six months, he was transferred to limited service and eventually worked as an Army artist in a village near Mannheim, Germany, where for his job he drew portraits of detained political opponents of the Nazis. He identified with such a category of “displaced persons.” After receiving honorable discharge in 1946, and a brief stint back in the U.S. studying at the Art Institute of Chicago, he decided to leave the States after experiencing postwar racial aggression against Japanese-Americans. Tajiri recalled, “I reminded people of their recent enemy.”⁴

² Tajiri, 1993, p. 45.

⁴ Tajiri 1993, p. 44.

³ For more on the internment of Japanese Americans and the Tajiri family, see Robinson 2009.

In 1948, he received G.I. Bill support for art study in Paris and left the U.S. without a plan for permanent return. In Paris, he studied with Fernand Léger and Ossip Zadkine. He later moved to Amsterdam where he lived with his family, and eventually settled in Baarlo.

From his maintained distance, Tajiri's sculptural and conceptual works often reframed American symbolism around dialectical pairings of spatial presence and absence. He cited iconic American sculptor Gutzon Borglum as one of the few artists who influenced his practice, because Borglum "blasted the heads of 4 presidents out of the granite slopes of mount rushmore" [sic]. Tajiri understood the parallels between calculated destruction and Borglum's notion of the "emotional value of volume" to fathom monumental projects about American history, regardless of size or scope.⁵ He viewed American geopolitics by proposing artworks and forging sculptures that presented material forms with suggestive voids, membrane surfaces, visible negative spaces, and inferred connections.

Take, for example, Tajiri's 1953 *Wounded Knee*, 1890 sculpture named after the nineteenth century U.S. Army's battle at the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, which resulted in over 100 deaths, including indigenous civilians. His chosen nomenclature conjures land theft, border conflicts, and the importance of the date in a history of national violence. Tajiri's surrealist ironwork has the surface of a cell membrane, climbs upwards to over three-feet to nearly resemble a small tower or satellite, and stands on three talon-like legs. Sharp objects including arrows, thorns, and scissors are abstracted as menacing spikes protruding off its top-half surface, with a hook engulfed in its visible midsection. When he later carved a representation of this sculpture on scraperboard for a retrospective book, he also placed a black and white American flag under its base, as if to conjure a military coffin.⁶

Tajiri also visited on later and connected legacies of American violence. For example, *Nagasaki* (1957) features a figure



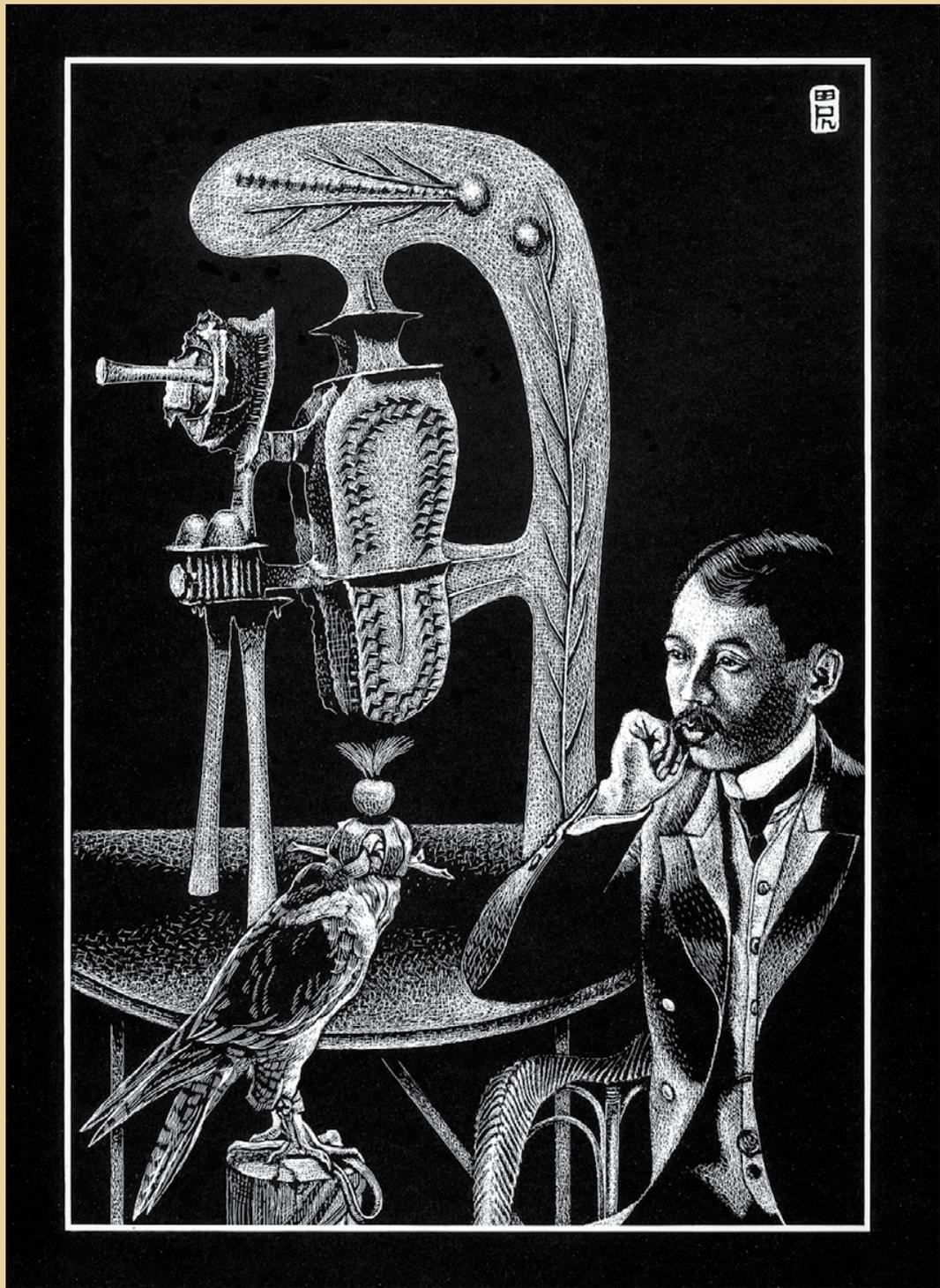
Nagasaki 1957, bronze, height 200 cm.

with a classical form, but with a headless and armless body. Posed as a classical Renaissance figure in disintegration, its webbed skin serves as a study in form and spectacular decay. Here, Tajiri conjures a link between his fraught American identity and Japanese diasporic bloodline.

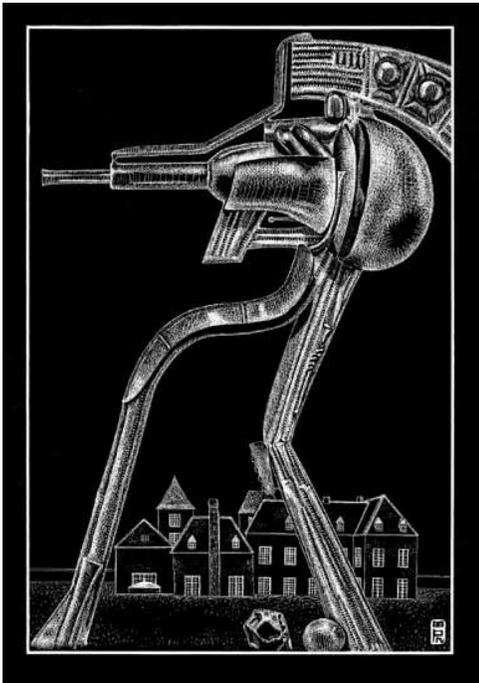
In 1958, in another set of sculptures, which he called the *Tower of Babel* or *Columns for Meditation*, Tajiri reflected on the "gap in communication" during the Cold War between the superpowers. He had pioneered a method of carving an inverse design into porous bricks. He sculpted not to build out,

⁵ Hillenius, Tajiri, and Marks 1974.

⁶ Tajiri 1993, p. 93; and Hillenius, Tajiri, and Marks 1974. See figure p. 81.



Made in USA 1965, Ryukichi Tajiri ca. 1909.



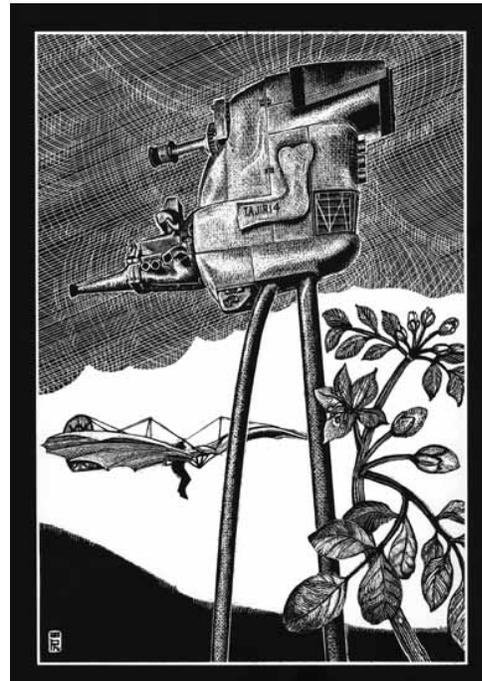
Made in USA 1965, Kasteel Scheres, Baarlo.

but through the reduction of form, effectively making a mold inside of the bricks. He then would pour a molten material into this cast to form an artwork. For his towers, he created complex representations of upwardly built structures, which are more allegorical than historically specific. The towers are each comprised of stacked upon levels resembling rooms, each one unique, leading to a head that nearly resembles a feather of a rooster or wilted leaf. Each level appears sturdy when viewed as strata on top of one another, and yet as a whole the towers are ashen, brittle, and thus suggestive of an impending crumble.⁷

Tajiri's *Made in USA* series, built in conjunction with a yearlong teaching residency at the Art Institute of Minneapolis (his longest return to the U.S. since the 1940s) consisted of over a dozen sculptures and related "Machines." He reflected on America's role in Vietnam and the ways technology operated to conduct war without face-to-face human interaction. Within this series, the sculptures

either carried names like *Fortress* or *Tank*, or just identifying numbers. Each has legs, as if to anthropomorphize them. But they also looked as if hybrid figures, composed of abstracted, recognizable features of insects, leaves, high-tech weapons, and robots. Tajiri wove together expressions of technology and grotesque nature, and pondered human intentionality in leveraging creative energies toward violence. He claimed he made these machines to help him confront the legacy of war in his own family and his life. Tajiri recalled, "They expressed the need to purge myself of the horrors of the war... I meant them to be a protest against the excessive amounts of money spent by governments to wage hot and cold wars."⁸ Tajiri was upset to find out exhibitions of this work, as was the case in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, were received by patrons as glorifying war. That experience upset him, and he proceeded to look to other ways to explore themes of war, without abstraction beyond recognition.

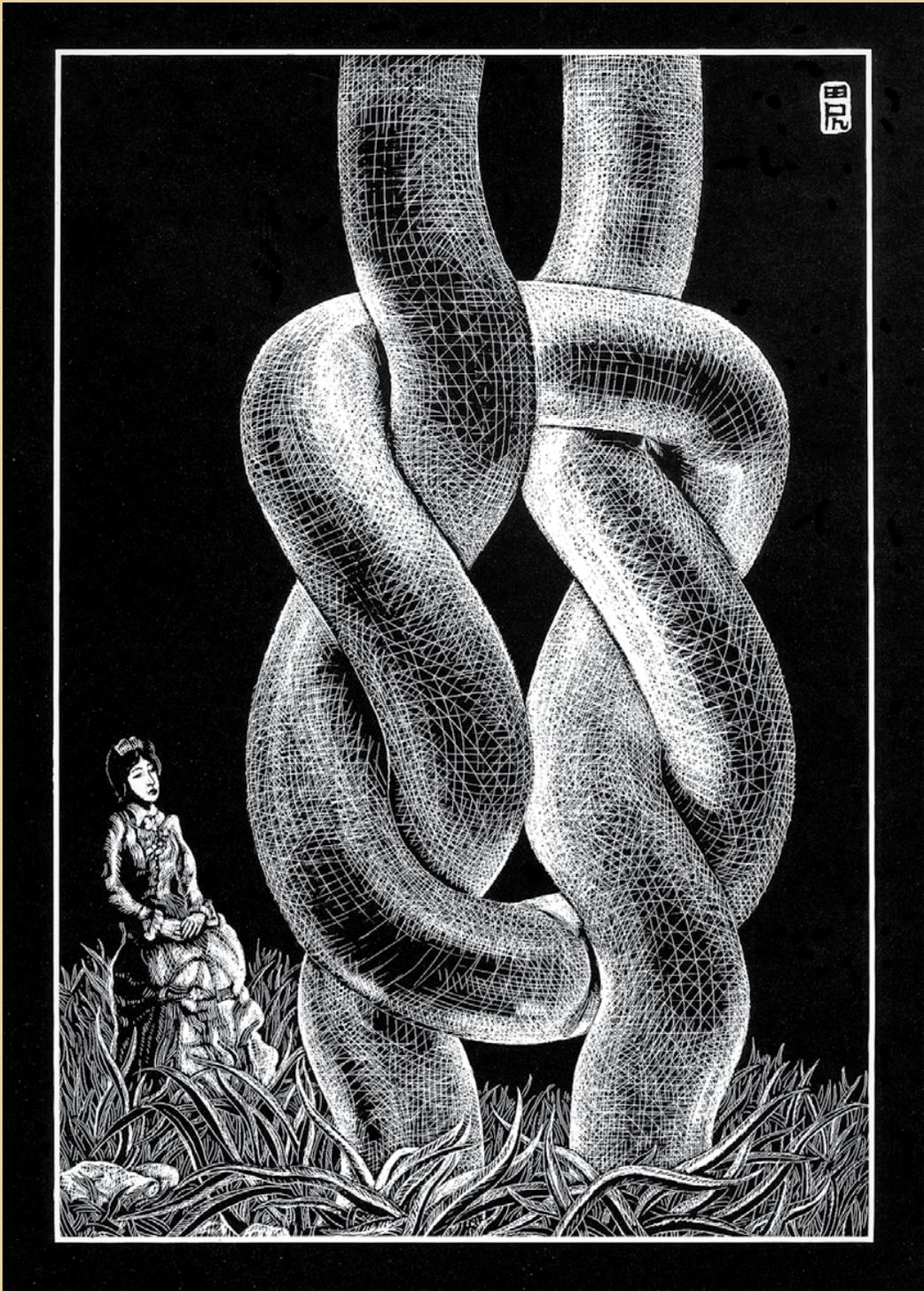
Responding to the reception of his own anti-war artworks, Tajiri's created a series of monu-



Machine no. 4 1966, Otto Lilienthal ca. 1890.

⁷ Tajiri 1993, p. 74.

⁸ Tajiri 1993, p. 69.



Granny's Knot 1968, Fuyo Kikuta-Tajiri ca. 1913.



The Berlin Wall 1969-70, Approaching the Wall, the view to the left, ahead of him, and to the right.

Tajiri's most ambitious project in exile was his multi-decade venture to document and make sense of the Berlin Wall. In 1969, as he was to begin a teaching post at West Berlin's Hochschule der Künste, the border, even at its then state of systemic overhaul and reconstruction by the East German state, was too tremendous of a structure to ignore. He decided to photograph the entirety of the wall. Tajiri, an American expatriate and veteran who left his home country twenty years earlier, experienced the traces of U.S. military occupation while moving through divided Berlin. While traversing the city, the sculptor sought reflection over sculptural fabrication, even as he carefully focused on material components of the wall. In his images, Tajiri presents visions of an abundance of disparate building materials, border components, and social circumstances of division that together exploded the notion of a singular and simple Berlin Wall. Specifically, Tajiri views the vast intended and unintended architectural elements of the border: concrete, steel, brick, wood, water, wire, debris, trees, gravel, sand, shrubs, rubble, and trash on the scene. He encounters multiple forms of machinery and modes of transport, including boats, excavators, trains, bicycles, trolleys, and cars – routinely parked perpendicularly near or against the wall in mundane fashion. He challenges notions of isolation along the border

by playing between the physical quality of the wall as blockade and the variety of social activity around its established frontier.

When locating a starting point into his project, Tajiri drove to the southeast edge of West Berlin's American sector. There, he ascended an observation deck and pointed his 35mm camera downward at the outer barrier of the wall. This first vantage gave Tajiri a chance to inspect both the physical quality of the wall and its surrounding environment on both sides. Here, he began to register a sort of "emotional value of volume" of the wall, in Borglum's terms, without sculpted touch or formal reduction. He varied his perspective. Tajiri was not just enthralled by the wall's spectacular form but perhaps more so by its total environs.¹¹

Tajiri scoured the wall's presence. But through his attention to its materiality and surrounding social scenes, Tajiri came face to face with his exiled American status. From the onset to his images, his path up through the city starts first with images in the rural southern edge of West Berlin, as noted, in the American sector of West Berlin. Soon after, Tajiri brings the most obvious landmark of the American section of the city, the "American Sector" signs denoting exit and entrance along the borderline by the wall, into dozens of frames of his study. Tajiri's emphasis on the

¹¹. All image readings drawn from Tajiri 2005.

signs is chosen, even as they sporadically populate the entirety of the internal border. Originally, the signs were placed throughout the middle of Berlin, following the occupation of the city after 1945, by all four of the occupying powers. Despite the status and clarity of the wall years later, American Sector signs remained littered across the landscape as the border was fortified, even at locations without obvious crossing checkpoints. Among the most recognizable instructions, read “You Are Now Leaving the American Sector of Berlin/ *Sie Verlassen Den Amerikanischen Sektor*,” which would be read while facing east denoted the end of the allied border zone. From the other side of the sign, which often had to be viewed from the very edge of West Berlin’s territory or from the wall itself, the text alternately read: “You are entering the American sector/Carrying Weapons Off Duty Forbidden/ Obey Traffic Rules.” Other variations include those

warning lines in French and Russian, or that shorten the text altogether into the German, “Achtung!”¹² In historic documentation of this period of division, the sign is most often viewed from the West. However, when viewed alternately, the most common exit signs of the GDR, mostly viewed by foreign visitors rather than citizens stated, “You are now leaving the main city of the German Democratic Republic,” a claim of ideological and urban authority. Over the course of Tajiri’s project, the repetition of the signs over this landscape and within the images, he seems to refuse to accept the smooth geopolitical layout of Berlin. He treats the signs as staggered question marks, to ponder them as possible elements of the wall system itself or just as reminders of this estranged Cold War American borderland space.

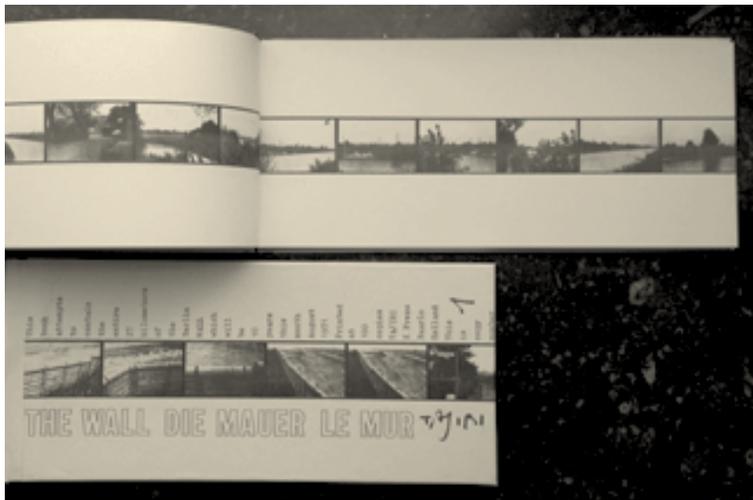
Tajiri continued to imagine the proper aesthetic and critical treatment of the wall shortly after his ground survey. In 1971, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Berlin Wall, Tajiri compiled his images and self-printed a small, hand-sized book, entitled, *The Wall Die Mauer Le Mur*. He made only 100 copies of this rarified artifact. In 1972, with the permission of the Berlin Senate, Tajiri flew over the city and captured a continuous, 20-minute film of the wall while strapped into a British “Sioux” helicopter. Three years later, he resumed work with his negatives of the wall survey. He began to produce daguerreotypes, a nineteenth century photochemical practice that produced ghostly keepsakes, a process nearly as antiquated as the notion of a walled city itself. He fashioned nearly 100 small framed daguerreotypes in an alchemic process, six featured scenes by the wall – including a transformed, precious image of the American crossing at Checkpoint Charlie.¹³

Despite Tajiri’s extensive work in Berlin’s American sector, he did not pursue the same level of public engagement back in the States as he did in Europe. His works were largely left outside of American purview, as he focused on his teaching and life in Europe. He continued to interact with American artists in



12. Hildebrandt 2001.

13. In another image taken in Berlin, he portrayed friend and fellow American artist in Berlin, Ed Kienholz, in a playful and nude gesture laying as a Manet *Olympia* in his workspace.



The Wall Die Mauer Le Mur 1971.

Europe when they visited on trips and fellowships traveling abroad, like Leonard Freed, Kenneth Snelson, and Keith Haring, as well as others, like Dorothy Iannone, who had resettled to West Berlin from the States. Tajiri found a passion for teaching at the Hochschule der Künste, where he continued to serve as a professor through 1989. He opted to take his students on a trip in 1986 not to his home country, but to the site of another infamous wall – the Great Wall of China.

There were exceptions to his concern for or legibility to American audiences.¹⁴ In 1981, for the Wall's twentieth anniversary, Tajiri took 360° panoramas of 24 prominent Berlin Wall intersections. From the advice of Snelson, he used a Widelux F7 camera, and rather than moving upward through the entire city, found a way to hint toward the contours of shape in an image. The final built generation of the Wall, *Grenzmauer 75*, here bears continued signs of disrepair, new expressions of graffiti, and on its periphery, the continued presence of American Sector signs. In one panorama, the sign is covered in a glob of dried dripping paint. In another, Tajiri is able to capture the “other” side of the typical American sector sign, still from the west, marking entrance as opposed to exit. Set against a bleak,

up close view of the wall, plain without graffiti, cropped to avoid its rounded top, a Christmas tree cast aside at its footprint, at its walkway at its base, the sign is a telling detail of the far right hand side. It sits at the far end of the 360° encircled image. The sign reads, in English: “You are entering the American sector/Carrying Weapons Off Duty Forbidden / Obey Traffic Rules.” Tajiri’s approach gives a view of the border scene from inside out. This is the first time he documents the view of the other side of the sign in any of his images, however he does not provide any significant remarkable views of the American sector beyond this sign itself. He prefers to stay on the city’s margins during this panorama project, positioned closely to the wall.¹⁵



psychoanalytic art film *Journey from Berlin* 1971. Rainer credits Tajiri, but the work as presented disavows an apparent connection to Tajiri’s extensive traversing of Berlin. Instead, the clip appears as if neutral stock flyover footage, without the context of his creative or critical imperative to look closely at and scale the border to a workable view.

¹⁵ A selection of the panoramas can be seen in Tajiri 1993, pp. 138–139. Others are viewable at the Shinkichi Tajiri Estate in Baarlo, Netherlands (Uncatalogued). Helen Westgeest notes of one depicting the Bornholmer Strasse Bridge “The open unfolding bridge, a border crossing between East and West Berlin, looks like an anthropomorphic sculpture and recalls association of form with Tajiri’s polyester knots.” Westgeest in Schoor 2012, p. 25.

¹⁴ While most American viewers would have to wait years after he made these wall works to view them, one glimpse of Tajiri’s vision did make it back to audiences in the States. Some of Tajiri’s aerial shots of the wall were embedded in Yvonne Rainer’s 1980





The Berlin Wall 360° panoramic photo 1981.



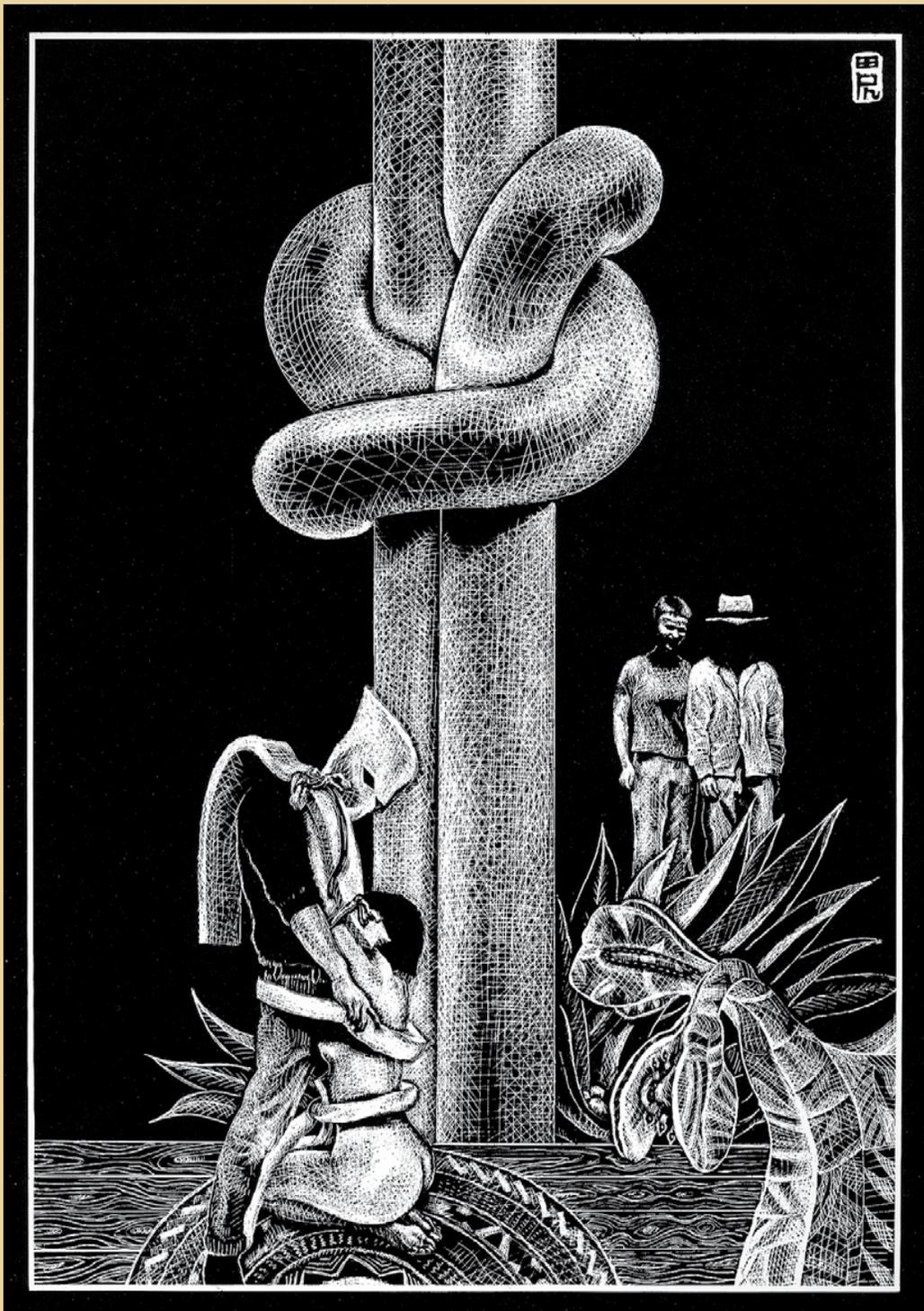
Checkpoint Bösebrücke, Bornholmerstrasse, Berlin 1981.



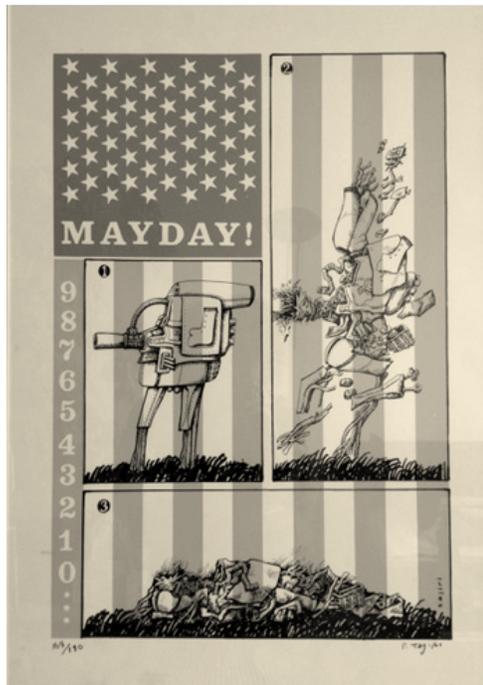
Waldemarstrasse, Berlin 1981.



Checkpoint Charlie, intersection Friedrichstrasse–Zimmerstrasse, Berlin 1981.



Square Knot 1972 (also known as the *Friendship Knot*). Ulrike Birkhoff in search of Casteneda's Don Juan, Mexico.



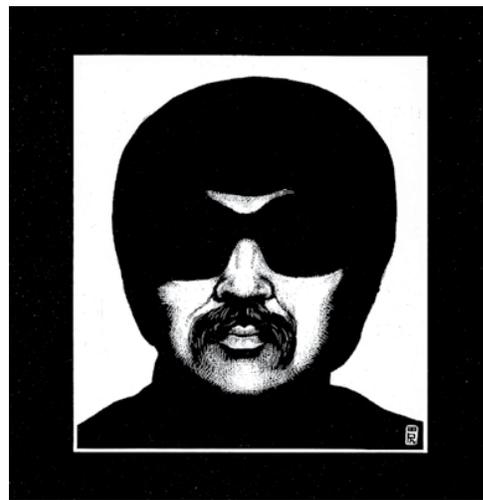
Silkscreen 1971.

That same year, in 1981, his installation of a pair of identical *Friendship Knot* sculptures underscores his own sense of his American identity, a balance between distant connection and chosen exile. One version of Tajiri's knot was included as a part of the exhibition *Amerikanische Künstler in Berlin* at the Amerika Haus in West Berlin, the institution in Schöneberg established in 1945 to promote cultural exchange between Berliners and Americans, and a site of antiwar Vietnam protests in the 1960s. The show was held semi-regularly there with a rotating cast of artists, and was sponsored by the Initiative Berlin-USA e.V. Their director wrote in its 1986 catalogue that Tajiri was among the eight artists selected "from among the nearly one hundred who currently work in Berlin.... Through their work they all allow us to experience the effects this city had on them."¹⁶ Tajiri's knot stood outside the building, and a photograph of its installation in the catalogue depicts a wooded scene outside, akin to the notion of the knot in the jungle.

¹⁶ Dreyblatt 1986.

Here, a sculpture made by a self-exiled American, outside of the West Berlin *Amerika Haus*, reaffirms a location of creative exchange and critical distance, against the long shadows of war and possible reconciliations.

The same year, the other polyester *Friendship Knot* was given a permanent placement back in the United States. Standing over twenty feet tall, the giant work was fabricated and shipped from the Netherlands to Tajiri's hometown of Los Angeles. This *Friendship Knot* was placed in Little Tokyo, outside of the National Museum of Japanese American Culture on Weller Court. For the occasion, Tajiri returned briefly to America for the dedication ceremony. Family members from Europe and America joined Tajiri, as did luminaries including L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley and actor George Takei, himself a former forced detainee of the internment camps. As a new landmark of the Japanese American section of the city, installed four decades after the horrors of the internment camps, the *Friendship Knot* served as an icon of renewed civic participation. In the tradition of Tajiri's knots, it also became a venue for questioning and exploring reconciliation in the face of exile. That day, as part of the festivities and a gesture of gratitude, Tajiri received a key to his hometown of Los Angeles. The key, a symbolic arti-



Selfportrait 1974.



Receives the Key to the City from Mayor Tom Bradley at the unveiling of the *Friendship Knot* in Little Tokyo, LA 1981.

fact, opens no doors but harkens back to the divisions and loss of home in his American past. Tajiri brought the key back with him to Baarlo. He hung the commemorative key in his Dutch castle.

Tajiri's final years brought no resolution of exile, but a flurry of continued activity along his mental borders. Despite living outside of the U.S. for over six decades, Tajiri continued to hold onto his U.S. citizenship through his life. But at age 85, Tajiri finally became a dual citizen with the Netherlands, his adopted home. He remained a vocal critic of U.S. militarism and held onto a distrust dating back to his internment, even as he stayed voraciously tuned in to American culture, sports, and news through his cable television at his castle. Tajiri passed away in his studio in Baarlo in March 2009, at the age of 85.

His posthumous legacy re-configures exile into a new sort of dwelling – his body of work and historic imprint in American culture yields new forms of belonging that signifies on previous loss and rupture. The most prominent gesture of reconstitution came after

his death, when Tajiri's family accepted a posthumous distinction on his behalf from the U.S. government. In 2011, he, along with the rest of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of Nisei soldiers, who fought for America after being imprisoned in internment camps, were awarded the Congressional Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. Each medal was inscribed with the words of their common slogan: "Nisei Soldiers of World War II – Go For Broke."

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