

Diasporic Abstraction: Tomie Ohtake and Brazilian Art

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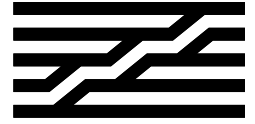
Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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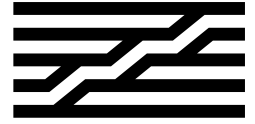
Tomie Ohtake was born on 21 November 1913 in the city of Kyoto in Japan. In 1936, at the age of 23, she made the long sea voyage to visit one of her brothers in São Paulo, Brazil. Upon her arrival, her brother decided she should stay longer due to the growing global turmoil and eventual start of the Second World War. A year after her arrival, she married a Japanese Brazilian man and they raised two sons together. Though she had taken an interest in art as a child, she did not become an artist until later in her life, when domestic responsibilities demanded less of her time. As Ohtake noted about her return to art, “I had already forgotten my desired vocation, which felt doomed to be sacrificed to the routine of domestic work”.¹ After a brief period as a figurative painter, Ohtake dedicated her artistic career to abstract art, moving broadly from gestural works to a loose and imprecise geometric style, and then to hard-edged forms. With a focus on her early paintings from 1950 to 1970, my essay examines Ohtake’s abstract art practice through both her diasporic experience and her identity as a woman artist in Brazil in order to emphasise these categories as interpretive art historical strategies.

Ohtake was part of a larger community of Japanese immigrants in Brazil, many of whom had made the trip across the Indian and South Atlantic oceans to work as migrant labour on coffee plantations. Between 1908 and 1940, nearly 200,000 Japanese men, women, and children migrated to Brazil.² Most pre-war immigrants believed they would return home so they maintained their connections – political, religious, cultural, and linguistic – to Japan, and therefore remained an isolated community within the modern Brazilian state. They formed ethnic enclaves on the farms and in the cities, read Japanese newspapers and magazines, received schooling in Japanese, and continued to worship the emperor. In contrast to other Japanese who had arrived in Brazil as children or moved to small towns to work, Ohtake’s immigrant experience differed in that she was already a young adult when she settled in São Paulo – the only Brazilian city she would call home – and therefore did not depend on her parents or older generations to act as the bridge to Japanese culture and traditions.



In São Paulo, Japanese Brazilian artists worked and socialised together, and in 1935 formed the art group Grupo Seibi, which offered professionalisation and community, both artistic and cultural. After a period of inactivity due to state violence against Japanese immigrants as a result of growing nationalism in the administration of President Getúlio Vargas, and the alliance formed in 1942 between Brazil and the United States against Japan in the Second World War, Seibi renewed its adherents in 1947.³ Ohtake joined the group in 1953. Unlike the more familiar model of a group as defined by an *a priori* program, Seibi was eclectic in its art styles, including both figurative and abstract artists. Focused on recruitment, critical exchange, education and advocacy, the group filled the void for its members, especially in response to the broad disinterest by the Brazilian public, as well as the internal lack of support by Japanese families for their children to become artists.⁴ Although they remained informed of trends and changes in Japanese art through magazines and newspapers,⁵ the group also negotiated "the loss of a Japanese aesthetic sensibility", in the words of the group's founder. Their immigrant experience meant they could not re-create their world in Brazil, even with the knowledge and goods brought with them from Japan. It no longer made sense in the world in which they now lived.⁶ Grupo Seibi formed a community among Japanese Brazilian artists and provided a network to navigate the Brazilian art world, in this way reminding us that diasporic artistic processes are the result of unfolding experiences of belonging and unbelonging in a new homeland.

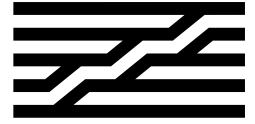
In her turn towards abstraction, Ohtake initially borrowed the calligraphic stroke, though combining it with the wet looseness of ink painting and a darkened or haunting scratch and scribble. Between 1959 and 1962 she produced about 40 works known as "the blind paintings", in which she blindfolded herself in order to paint. Giving her work over to the aleatoric mark, yet within a conceptual programme, the gesture cannot be read as expressive of an artistic intentionality, but instead recalls Surrealist or Dadaist games in favour of granting the medium its own autonomy or vitality. To consider these works, they can be organised into three categories: 1) scratched surfaces; 2) colour washes with dense black marks; and 3) flat, circular areas of colour. Across all the works, colours and forms appear as if from within the canvas and therefore retain the possibility they will return to the same ground, disappearing from our view. Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff proposes that this sense of the suspension of time in the works operates as a way to challenge the "the ocularcentrism that governs modernity".⁷ The refusal of her own vision in the production of the works transfers onto the paintings in which our own sight cannot be trusted as the way to "know" them. The making of the works through formlessness naturally unites them with the *informe* of *Informel* art, characterised by the looseness of the shapes and materiality of the painting. This style of painting emerged in France out of the destruction of World War II and the German occupation, and is thus often associated with "the horrors of the war".¹⁸ The term, *art informel*, was invented by the French art critic and curator Michel Tapié. Visual similarities can be seen between the paintings of Ohtake and those of Jean Fautrier (1898–1964), Wols (1913–1951), and Jaroslav Serpan (1922–1976), though she preferred Mark Tobey (1890–1976).⁹



Unlike her contemporaries and fellow Seibi members, Manabu Mabe (1924–1997) and Flavio-Shiró (b. 1928), whose strokes convey action, Ohtake's paintings have always been aligned with a more conceptual, philosophical, and spiritual approach to artmaking. A remove or detachment distanced her style from the physical gesturality of these other artists, which led the artist to abandon the Informalist style in favour of geometric abstract art, further underscoring the interpretation of her art as conceptual, and now in dialogue with the traditions of Brazilian Concrete art. The 1950s Brazilian artworld experienced the rise of abstract art often divided into the schools of Concretism and Informalism or Tachism. The former, Concrete art, was represented by artists in São Paulo, known as the Grupo Ruptura, and in Rio de Janeiro, as the Grupo Frente and Grupo Neoconcreto. At the time and in the subsequent art-historical writing, these practitioners of geometric abstract art were pitted against those taking a more lyrical approach to abstraction, whose artists never formed groups and remained more loosely affiliated. Many of the Japanese Brazilian abstract artists, including Mabe and Flavio-Shiró mentioned earlier, along with Tikashi Fukushima (1920–2001) and the blind paintings of Ohtake, tended towards the gestural expressiveness of Informalism and Tachism, the terms used to describe their painting in Brazilian art criticism of the time.¹⁰

With Ohtake's turn towards more geometric abstract art, she defied the neat organisation of the abstract art scene, not allying herself with any one group, and instead worked in her own individual style. Although Ohtake adopted geometric abstraction, the forms remained rough-edged and soft in their appearance, pioneering a unique pictorial approach. *Sem título* [Untitled] (1964, private collection) depends on layering for its composition: two fields of white sit atop one another, vertically along the canvas, punctuated by a third layer of red squares that appear to overlap the lower bands of colours. Though flat, the red transforms the colour below, causing a shadow, as if translucent or tissue paper. The eye returns to the edges of the blocks of colour, whose irregularity and imprecision means the doubling does not result in identical twin forms but varying pairs. An analogous operation can be seen in *Sem título* [Untitled] (1968, Collection OAS AMA – Art Museum of the Americas) where once again doubling occurs with two similar, but not identical, lilac shapes that appear to equally push and pull towards each other.

A recent exhibition, *Tomie Ohtake: At Her Fingertips*, curated by Pablo Miyada at the Galeria Nara Roesler in New York, highlighted Ohtake's working process in these paintings.¹¹ As a way of "sketching", Ohtake made collages from "printed matter; magazines, invitations, newspapers, brochures" that would then become painted canvases.¹² Like the conceptual and aleatory approach of the blind paintings, Ohtake also depended on the chance tear of the paper to determine her composition, once more choosing a working practice that over-determined her own artistic agency. As Miyada writes: "The process was Ohtake's way of dealing with the instantaneity of gesture and infusing the entire painting process with chance and control".¹³ The frayed edges in the painted forms closely resemble her hand tearing the paper, and the collages reveal the disruption of the grid structure. The collage *Sem título* [Untitled] (1965)¹⁴ offers a glimpse into the construction of the composition, juxtaposing uneven and jagged rips as lines with the regularity of the grid pattern that attempts to hold together the cracking form. In the lower left, the grid disappears as if

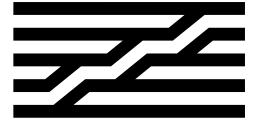


devoured by the yellow and black colours – Ohtake may have painted over or erased the orthogonal lines. The final painting diverges from the collage in its colour tone and refinement. The shredded lines rippling across the surface are nearly gone, lending the work a quiet elegance that contrasts with the quivering energy of the collage.

Her abstract art process combined with her conceptual method operated as a way to displace her own subjectivity as both a woman and immigrant artist. Aliza Edelman makes the case that women artists in Latin America may have chosen to work with abstraction in order "to separate a personal identity from a public and creative one", given the ways that women were often accorded fewer rights in the region.¹⁵ Should we read Ohtake's abstraction as an art form that disavows gender, and moreover one that communicates nothing of her own immigrant experience? Or should we apply Helen Molesworth's reading of women abstractionists in the United States during the feminist movement to Ohtake's work? Molesworth argues that women painters like Joan Snyder (1940), Howardena Pindell (1943), and Mary Heilmann (1940) took cover in abstract art as a way to escape the patriarchal system of art, and simultaneously rebelled against it through their choice of colours associated with femininity, their assault on the grid format as a masculine signifier, and their embrace of a kind of "bad" painting.¹⁶

In this period Ohtake used the grid as a structuring system but without surrendering to it; similarly, she defied the hard-edged precision of geometric forms. The grid, when examined closely, is not rigidly uniform. In the collage mentioned above, the two central columns have the same dimensions, while the outer columns are smaller. Even in her use of lines to map space, she developed an idiosyncratic structure. In addition, the handmade and somewhat accidental quality of her geometric abstraction contrasted sharply with the male-dominated São Paulo concrete art group, Grupo Ruptura, that relied heavily on tools of mathematics, sciences, and industrial design, such as a ruling pen or compass, to give a precision and orderliness to their works.¹⁷ In *Sem título* [Untitled] (1965), courtesy the artist estate and Nara Roesler¹⁸ Ohtake added a diagonal black slashing stroke on the left side of the yellow form that was not present in the collage. And yet the sense of improvisation inherent to these painterly gestures is contradicted by the practised vertical black mark on the right in the collage, then transferred to the painting. Ohtake's paintings bring together the appearance of spontaneity through the gestural stroke with the order of geometric abstraction in their infrastructure: an ordered disorder.

The sense of duality in her work – doubling forms, gestural and geometric abstraction, collage and painting, chance and control – should be filtered and take on new meaning through the prism of her own diasporic experiences. Both Japanese and Brazilian, Ohtake rejected references to her ethnic identity as an interpretive strategy, while also acknowledging the way it formed her as an artist. In 1969 she stated, "I do not know, for example, where the motivation or inspiration [to make art] comes from. I do not want to be folkloric in the sense of making an Oriental or Japanese art, although I recognise that my training and temperament are Eastern. But I came to Brazil in 1937, I have two Brazilian children who are architects,

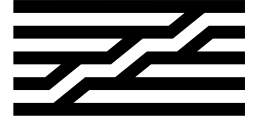


and I socialise very much with Brazilians. As a result, I think my painting was also Westernised. I avoid subjectivism; I am objective and I am not moved to paint the external reality".¹⁹

Despite the perception of her painting as "Westernised," Herkenhoff, who is one of the foremost experts on Ohtake's art, reads this turn to objectivity and the desire to not paint "the external reality" as informed by Zen Buddhism, a return once more to her Japanese ethnicity and the long cultural and artistic traditions associated with this ancient religion. He writes, "Tomie's work does not seek to illustrate Zen. It lets itself become involved by the painting, as if it were a thing of the world, and does not attempt to understand it on the basis of its looks".²⁰ He began his catalogue essay for the retrospective of her work in 2000 with a discussion of Zen Buddhist painting and its detached character, confusing or blurring this religious school of art with the conceptual nature of her painting, in other words, its anti-opticality, composition through chance strategies, and restraint. This sense of "subtlety" or minimalism was one of the few ways Ohtake credited her Japanese heritage in shaping her artistic practice.²¹

Though Ohtake's relationship to and use of Zen Buddhism in her art deserves more research – beginning with the question of which Zen Buddhism was in circulation in mid-century Brazil – importantly, her fusion of abstract Zen painting shares similarities with her peer, Yutaka Toyota (b. 1931), who moved to Brazil from Japan after the Second World War. His painting *Em Tempo Anterior ao Nada* [In the Time before Nothing] (1960), represents his own experimentation with Informalism in its surface treatment and geometric abstraction with the incorporation of a circle-like image: a reference to the *ensō*, a symbol from Zen Buddhism, the artist's religion. During this period (1960-1965), Toyota painted the circle repeatedly, thereby wedding the Western tradition of geometric abstract art to the long history of Zen Buddhism. In the 1970s and 1980s, Ohtake would also continually paint the curve and the circle. Toyota and Ohtake could also be compared to other global artists who turned to geometry as a signifier of East Asian spirituality, rather than western European avant-garde traditions, like Japanese artist Hasegawa Saburō (1904-1957) and U.S. artist and musician John Cage (1912-1992).

To study Ohtake's art, scholars must shift between her formation and experience as an artist in Brazil, while simultaneously remaining attentive to the ways her art dialogues with long traditions of East Asia *and* the contemporary movements emerging in the aftermath of the Second World War – a global re-ordering of artistic influences and concurrent stylistic movements. As an East Asian immigrant woman in a Latin American country practising abstract art, Ohtake did not fit neatly into the Western model of artmaking, and moreover called into question the national model at the centre of the discipline of art history. The artist's abstract artwork did not form part of the competing schools of Concrete or Informalist art and in fact her practice continued to change and evolve in her long lifetime. Ohtake lived to 101! This multifarious career refused a linear order similar to the ways she persistently emptied her works of psychological expression or subjective agency. Ohtake's art challenges the scholar and audience to locate the artist in the work, putting both instead in continual movement.



Notes

1. Quoted in "Tomie encontrou no Brasil o caminho da arte que amava," *Folha de São Paulo* (4 December 1961), Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, artist file.
2. Stewart Lone, *The Japanese Community in Brazil, 1908-1940* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2.
3. Getúlio Vargas ran for president of Brazil in 1930 and lost, but claimed power through an armed coup, which was reinstated in 1937, keeping him leader of the country until 1945.
4. Maria Cecília França Lourenço, *Nipos brasileiros: mestres e alunos em 50 anos* (São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 1984). International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art*, ICAA Record ID 1110648, accessed 23 May 2017.
5. "Manabu Mabe sacrificou pela pintura uma fazenda de café," *Folha da noite* (12 July 1958). Artist file, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.
6. Paulo Roberto Arruda de Menezes, "Grupo Seibi: o nascimento da pintura nipo-brasileira", *Revista USP* 27 (Sept.-Nov. 1995), 106.
7. Paulo Herkenhoff, *Tomie Ohtake: Pinturas cegas* (Porto Alegre: Fundação Iberê Camargo, 2012), 110.
8. Serge Guilbaut, "Disdain for the Stain: Abstract Expressionism and Tachisme" in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 30.
9. "Tomie encontrou no Brasil o caminho da arte que amava," *Folha de São Paulo*, December 4, 1960. Artist file, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.
10. Mariola V. Alvarez, "Calligraphic Abstraction and Postwar Brazilian Informalist Painting," in *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 25-40.
11. See Mariola V. Alvarez, « Abstraction diasporique », *Les cahiers du Musée National d'art moderne*, no 159, spring 2022, 73.
12. Ibid.
13. *Tomie Ohtake: At Her Fingertips*, Galeria Nara Roesler, New York, 1 November – 22 December 2018. Miyada found the collages in Ohtake's studio-home archive, but he also acknowledges that Ohtake referenced the studies in previous publications and provided photographs for various catalogues.
14. *Tomie Ohtake: At Her Fingertips*, press release, Galeria Nara Roesler, 2018.
15. Pablo Miyada, "Tomie Ohtake: At Her Fingertips", *Tomie Ohtake: At Her Fingertips*, Galeria Nara Roesler, New York, 2018.
16. See Mariola V. Alvarez, « Abstraction diasporique », *Les cahiers du Musée National d'art moderne*, no 159, spring 2022, 78.
17. Aliza Edelman, "The Masquerade of Geometry: Identity and Abstraction in the Americas", in *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920-50s*, Mary Kate O'Hare, ed. (Newark, NJ and San Francisco, CA: Newark Museum and Pomegranate, 2010), 105.
18. Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Cornelia Butler, ed. (Los Angeles, CA and Cambridge, MA: Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 2007), 429.
19. Pia Gottschaller, "Making Concrete Art," in *Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros*, Pia Gottschaller, Aleca Le Blanc, Zanna Gilbert, Tom Learner, and Andrew Perchuk, eds. (Los Angeles, CA and Chicago, IL: Getty Publications and the University of Chicago Press, 2017), 39-47.
20. See Mariola V. Alvarez, « Abstraction diasporique », *Les cahiers du Musée National d'art moderne*, no 159, spring 2022, 80.
21. Gilse Campos, "Tomie Ohtake O Recado Objetivo de uma Pintura," *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B (25 August 1969), p. 10. Artist file, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.
22. Paulo Herkenhoff, *Tomie Ohtake: na Trama Espiritual da Arte Brasileira* (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2003), 76.
23. "Pintora abre mostra hoje," *O Estado de São Paulo* (14 March 1968). Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Artist file.