

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

'Yellow Terror' art collection: Satire both bright and bitter

By Michael Upchurch
Seattle Times arts writer

The word "collectibles" usually has a dainty ring to it — but not for Roger Shimomura.

In "Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura," the Seattle-born artist takes toxic gems from his collections of Asian-stereotype memorabilia (film posters, masks, World War II propaganda) and juxtaposes them with recent acrylics on canvas that they've inspired in him.

Seattle art connoisseurs may be familiar with Shimomura from his shows at Greg Kucera Gallery. Commuters will know him from his public art work in the bus tunnel at Westlake Station or near Link light rail's new Othello Station.

But a whole new context for his work is provided by the collector's items recently donated by Shimomura to the Wing Luke Asian Museum (roughly 25 percent of which are on display in "Yellow Terror").

Shimomura's working philosophy seems to be: Anything that doesn't kill me can only strengthen me. He ingests the most vitriolic depictions of Asian physiognomy and character traits, only to bring them back up in scathing cartoonish format.

The process, he commented earlier this week, is not unlike acid reflux. Images that you swallow without sufficient question induce considerable discomfort once you try to digest them.

Shimomura's bright, bitter satire is triggered, in part, by his family history. Born a third-generation Japanese-



ROGER SHIMOMURA

"Astro Boy," 2004.



ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART / WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY
"American Portrait #2," 2002.

Art exhibit
'Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura'

Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; first Thursday & third

American in 1939, he was placed with his family in Puyallup Assembly Center and Minidoka Relocation Center following the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His grandmother, a writer with a keen sense of history-in-the-making, kept a diary throughout her life and bequeathed it to her grandson, inspiring his later artwork and performance art.

Saturday of the month, 10 a.m.- 8 p.m.; today through April 18, 2010, Wing Luke Asian Museum, 719 S. King St., Seattle; \$8.95-\$12.95 (206-623-5124 or www.wingluke.org).

In "Yellow Terror," however, the more immediate catalyst is World War II propaganda. The show's title painting depicts the artist himself mimicking Asian caricatures at the same time that he's all but drowning in them. The caricatures are taken straight from items in his collection. "It's important to re-present these images as close to exactly the way they were offered in the 1940s," he writes, "otherwise they become more an invention of my own imagination."

The propaganda includes hand-drawn material and is of a type that flourished on both sides during the war. Still, it's disturbing to see how eagerly its creators seize the chance to dehumanize the enemy.

Seemingly more benign are the salt-and-pepper shakers, most of them made in Japan. They depict various Asian stock figures in fairly bland fashion. But "Yellow Terror" curator Stacey Uradomo-Barre finds them equally problematic because of their presence at the center of people's domestic lives. "You're taking these images of stereotypes of Asian people and then integrating [them] into your daily routine, so you don't even think about it anymore."

As for the paintings, they're pure dynamos of energy. Shimomura acknowledges the invigorating pleasure that comes, for painter and viewer alike, from his "stepping out of bounds, going a little further, stretching." While some are savage blasts, others bristle with ambiguity.

"Falling Son" is in the latter category, with its rendering of Joe Jitsu (Dick Tracy's sidekick) plummeting toward Walt Disney's Huey, Dewey and Louie, who hold up a U.S. flag as a rescue trampoline below him. Are they worried he'll wipe them out upon impact? Wondering if they're up to the task of saving him?

There's no straightforward reading on what's going on here — and that's how Shimomura intends it.

Michael Upchurch: mupchurch@seattletimes.com