Kenjiro Nomura, American Modernist: An Issei Artist’s Journey

This is the first solo exhibition of the work of Kenjiro Nomura (1896-1956) since the posthumous tribute at the Seattle Art Museum in 1960.

The exhibition will fill two of our main galleries. The largest Center Gallery will feature Nomura’s works from the teens through the 1950’s. This will provide an overview of the artist’s stylistic and professional growth.

Display cases will contain extremely rare family photographs and archival materials that have never been shown publicly.

The paintings and drawings will be on loan from the family’s personal collections as well as works owned by regional institutions and private collectors. Many of the paintings have been conserved specifically for this project giving the public the opportunity to see the original intention of the artist.

In the West Gallery, we will be featuring paintings and drawings created when Nomura and his family were interned at the Puyallup Assembly Center and at the
Minidoka Relocation Center. Once again, the family will be providing rare artifacts from this time to be exhibited in display cases.

The exhibition will be accompanied by the book, Kenjiro Nomura, American Modernist: An Issei Artist’s Journey, published by Cascadia Art Museum and distributed by the University of Washington Press. It is the culminating study in a series of related works by art historian Barbara Johns, PhD. These include The Hope of Another Spring: Takuichi Fujii, Artist and Wartime Witness, and Signs of Home: The Paintings and Wartime Diary of Kamekichi Tokita (both UW Press, 2017 and 2011).

Kenjiro Nomura (1896-1956) was born in Japan and came to the United States with his parents at the age of ten. On his own by sixteen, painting became a constant throughout his life as he experienced not only major artistic recognition but also business success and failure, racism and wartime incarceration, and, at last, American citizenship. The peak of his artistic success was the 1930s, when his paintings represented the Northwest in New York, Washington, DC, and the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. Incarcerated during World War II along with 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast, he continued to paint, leaving a record of his experience in more than one hundred paintings and drawings. Despite crippling challenges after the war, he resumed painting, developed a new artistic style, and once again gained recognition—the only one of his prewar colleagues to do so. He fulfilled a long-held goal to become a citizen after a federal law barring citizenship to Asian immigrants was voided.

In this deeply researched account, Johns writes about Nomura’s life and artistic achievement in the historical and social context of the time.

David F. Martin, curator of Cascadia Art Museum, contributed an essay that contextualizes Nomura’s artistic influences and activities in the Northwest.

Martin has pioneered the study of Issei artists in the Northwest and has written several groundbreaking publications on the subject and has lectured internationally.