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Bright colors and ugly stereotypes meld in ‘American Knockoff’

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In “Yellow Terror,” (2008) by Roger Shimomura, the artist is barely visible in the middle of a collage of perhaps a hundred “enemy Japanese” caricatures. (Roger Shimomura)

A review of “Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff” at Tacoma Art Museum through Sept. 13.

By [Gary Faigin](#)

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More than half the paintings in the kinetic and colorful Roger Shimomura exhibition at the Tacoma Art Museum are self-portraits, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we come away from the show knowing exactly whom we’ve been looking at. Shimomura uses his own face as a way of raising questions about the whole issue of identity, rather than portraying a particular self, and we see him taking on almost as many roles and masks as there are individual paintings.

In one painting, he poses as a martial artist going hand to hand with Bruce Lee; in another he wears a white wig and leads a group of samurai warriors in a sendup of “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” while in a different picture nearby he peels back a kimono to reveal a Superman costume.

All of the works in “Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff” are painted in an appealing and snappy style that borrows equally from comic art and animation (Mickey Mouse, Popeye), Pop Art, traditional Japanese prints and even Chinese propaganda posters; bright primary colors, strong outlines and bold shapes. The eye candy surfaces are frequently, and at times poignantly, at odds with the deadly serious content.

Take the strongest work in the show, the large Japanese-American internment camp painting entitled “American Infamy #5” (2010, acrylic on canvas), based on the artist’s childhood experience as a camp inmate in Puyallup then at Minidoka, in Idaho, during World War II. On first glance, the large, posterlike landscape panorama has an attractive, heroic quality, with a group of stalwart-looking GI Joes dominating the foreground, taking their guard tower work seriously by training their machine guns on the crowd below. The camp barracks are reduced to grim black boxes in perspective, surmounted by cutout black clouds, set against a stark desert landscape. Only when we examine the painting in more detail does the artist’s outrage come into clearer focus. The crowds of people the soldiers are guarding are a cross-section of ordinary society: elders in wheelchairs, children on scooters or jumping rope, even Japanese-American servicemen visiting relatives in detention. The real heroes of the painting aren’t the guards, but the inmates.

Shimomura deserves some sort of medal for his straightforward confrontation with ugly racial stereotypes. A particular yellow-shaded, bucktoothed, slant-eyed caricature became a popular America racist symbol for the Japanese “enemy” during the 20th century, and this disturbing image is the centerpiece of several particularly striking paintings. In “Americans vs. Japs #4” (2012, acrylic on canvas), the artist portrays himself as he actually looks, in the process of using martial art kicks and punches (another sly reference to racial stereotypes) to subdue a troop of “evil” Japanese soldiers, while comic book explosions literally go “Wham” and “Blam.” In “Yellow Terror” (2008, acrylic on canvas), the artist is barely visible in the middle of a riotous collage of perhaps a hundred “enemy Japanese” caricatures, but here, rather than battling them, he attempts to replicate them, using his fingers to add extra slant to his eyes, and baring his teeth as though emulating the toothy look of the cartoons — “See? It still doesn’t look like me!”

We all navigate a world of multiple selves (my version of me vs. your version of me), but race can taint this disconnect in a particularly destructive way. Roger Shimomura has made a career of exploring this dilemma, sharing his experiences using a deceptively straightforward and intentionally seductive pictorial language.

Gary Faigin is an artist, author, critic and co-founder/artistic director of the Gage Academy of Art.

‘Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff’

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, until 8 p.m. third Thursdays, through Sept. 13, 1701 Pacific Ave., Tacoma; \$12-\$14 (253-272-4258 or tacomaartmuseum.org).