

Haruko Okano

## HANDS OF THE COMPASSIONATE ONE

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Haruko Okano: *Hands of the Compassionate One*

BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Artist's Statement (1993)

HARUKO OKANO



**Haruko Okano: *Hands of The Compassionate One***

**By Robin Laurence, 2007**

Haruko Okano  
*Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993

acrylic on canvas with ornaments  
(274.3 x 152.4 cm)  
SAG 1999.01.01

Photographs by Cameron Heryet

Cultural identity, spiritual belief, environmental concerns and political activism intersect in the work of Haruko Okano. The Vancouver-based artist and poet was born in Toronto during the Second World War, and because of tragic family circumstances, was raised in a succession of foster homes from



Haruko Okano, *Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993, acrylic on canvas with ornaments (274.3 x 152.4 cm) SAG 1999.01.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

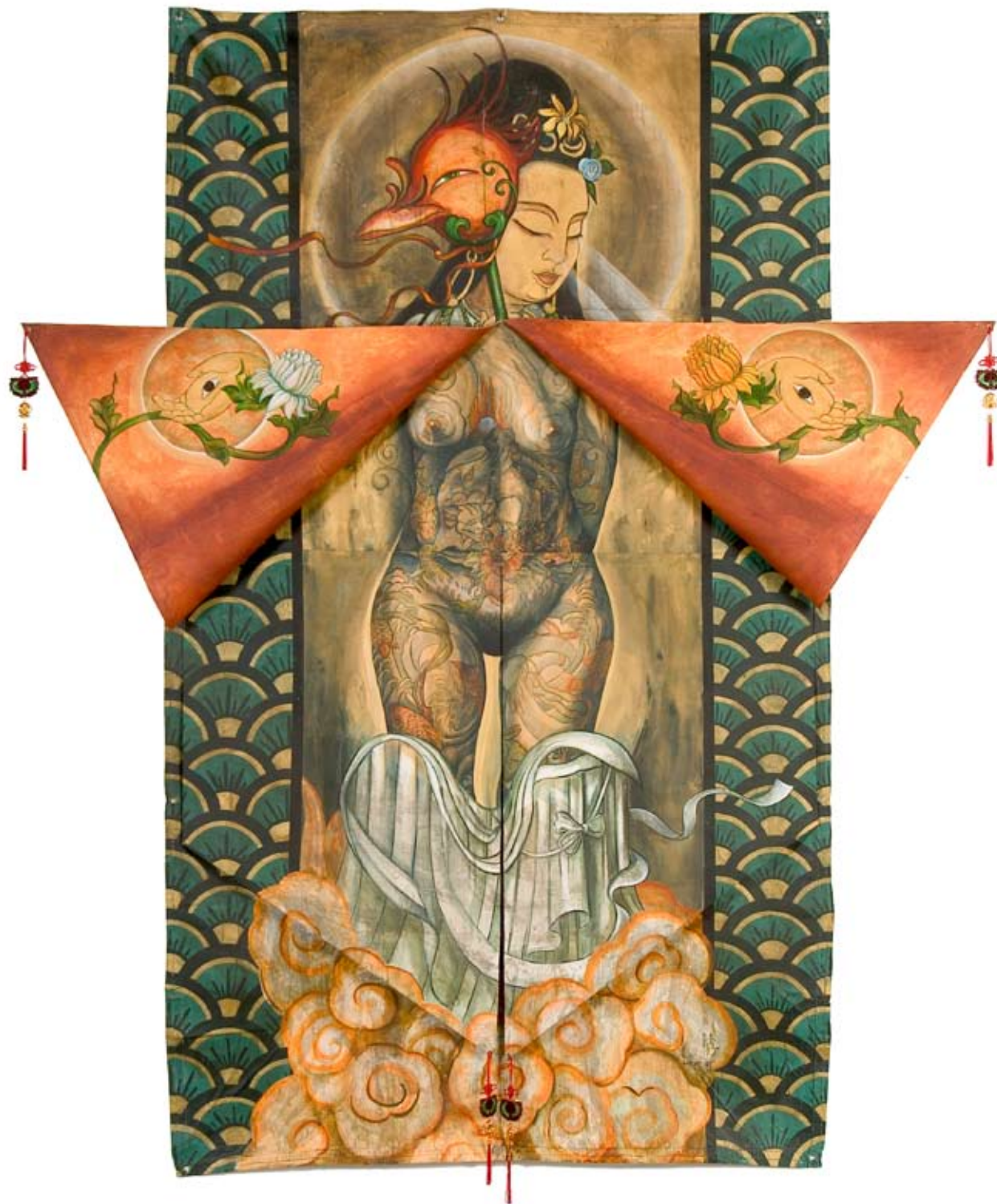
an early age. In addition to the grief, emotional trauma and sense of alienation she experienced as an orphan being shuttled through a series of unsympathetic environments, Okano suffered the loss of her Japanese-Canadian cultural heritage. This heritage includes social customs, her first language and the Buddhist religion, which her birth family had practiced. Her childhood suffering also coincided with larger political conditions in Canada: the internment and dispossession of thousands of West Coast Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War, restrictions on their movement and resettling after the war, and ongoing systemic discrimination against them as a group.

What sustained Okano through this period of painful dislocation was her extraordinary ability to make art and to find refuge in it.<sup>1</sup> As a child, she focused on animal subjects and the natural world. During the early part of her adult career, the recovery and expression of her cultural identity characterized much of her art practice, which includes printmaking, painting, mixed-media installations and community art projects. Okano's themes can be seen as an expression not only of her personal condition but also of a larger movement towards identity politics across the Canadian art world and beyond. Her work also reflects the process of political redress that took place in the 1970s and 80s between the federal government and the Japanese-Canadian community. Other subjects Okano has addressed are institutionalized racism, gender roles, human rights and sexuality. She works both individually and collaboratively, and was identified for many years with the Arts in Action Society. This Vancouver-based collective employed art (thematically organized exhibitions, ambitious mural projects) to bring public attention to a number of social issues. It also participated in cultural exchanges in Latin America and Africa.

Through both political action and creative expression (which she sees as synonymous), Okano struggled to reclaim what had been taken from her, only to discover that she is a "hybrid". She has stated that she does not feel at home and fully accepted within either Japanese culture or Anglo-Canadian culture but occupies a nebulous place in-between.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this condition of hybridity has been the subject of much of her art and poetry.

Even now, when Okano has shifted her focus to other themes, such as body politics, language and the environment, her ongoing interest in issues of cultural identity continues to function as a subtext in her work. She points out, for instance, that her environmental installations are underlain by her understanding of the traditional Japanese relationship to the natural world, including centuries of creating gardens in exquisite harmony with it.<sup>3</sup> During the past decade, Okano has become increasingly focused on what she calls "viewer-interactive components", that is, in creating ways of involving visitors in a direct, hands-on manner in the full realization of an artwork.<sup>4</sup> This interest arose from her observation that an intimidating gap often exists between gallery visitors and the art on view. It is Okano's goal to open new portals into the visitor's encounter with the art, so that it is not limited to the intellectual and the untouchably visual.

*Hands of the Compassionate One*, which Okano created for an Arts in Action project in West Africa in 1993, and which also has been exhibited in different venues in Canada and the United States, is one of her earliest ventures into viewer interaction. Painted in acrylic on heavy canvas, in the shape and format of an Asian scroll, it possesses four flaps that the viewer is encouraged to lift, revealing layers of startling imagery beneath its beautiful surface.



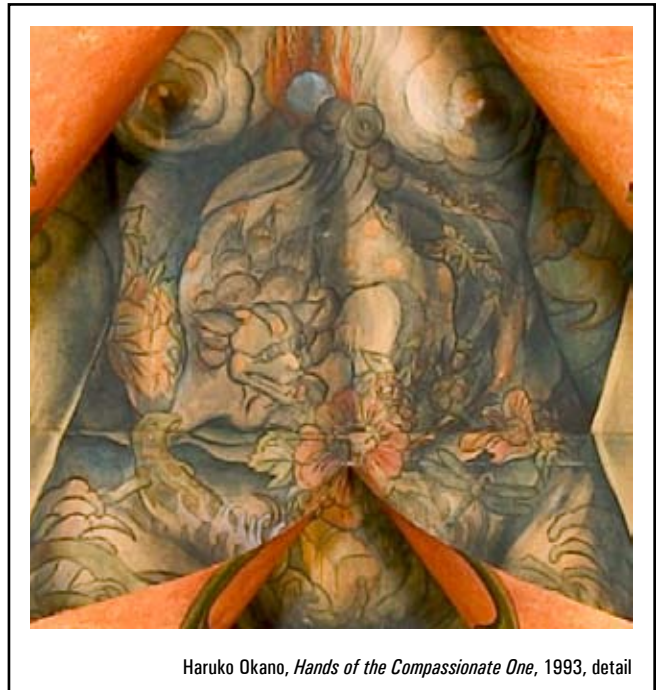
Haruko Okano, *Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993, acrylic on canvas with ornaments (274.3 x 213.3 cm) SAG 1999.01.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Raising the canvas folds or flaps stimulates a range of sensations and metaphors, from involvement in a mysterious theatrical event to participation in a spiritual journey or quest, through which deeper layers of consciousness and understanding are revealed. The process of revelation is both abstract and concrete.

Given the nature of the imagery, whose central figure is discovered to be naked and heavily tattooed beneath her garments, the canvas flaps can also be suggestive of flayed skin. This evocation, although grisly, accords with Okano's ongoing interest in the politics of the body and especially of its largest organ, the skin, and the skin's interface with the outside world. Behind the work also lies the artist's extensive research into Japanese tattooing traditions and subcultures, and the world history of the preservation of the dead and the rituals and processes surrounding it.

The complexities of Okano's imagery in *Hands of the Compassionate One* are not easily interpreted. (Although the work has been extensively exhibited, it has been written about very little, as if curators and critics have been apprehensive about assigning meanings to it.) Okano reports that the work came to her in a dream, and that she still does not fully understand it.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is clear that it intuitively relates to her commitment to both feminism (in the depiction of a powerful, all-seeing, female deity) and a form of Buddhism known as Vajrayana (which she practices devotedly). Compassion, enlightenment, the four elements, fecundity, the flux and impermanence of earthly existence, and Buddhist beliefs concerning *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death) and *nirvana* (a state of bliss achieved through extinguishing worldly desires), all are alluded to here. The white-robed figure on the surface of the scroll is a representation of the Buddhist deity Kwan-yin, the all-compassionate

mother goddess of China, also understood to correspond with the Tibetan Buddhist goddess Tara. In either manifestation, she is believed to be a "world-redeeming, world-sustaining divinity who paused on the threshold of nirvana because of her awareness of the suffering in the world."<sup>6</sup>



Haruko Okano, *Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993, detail

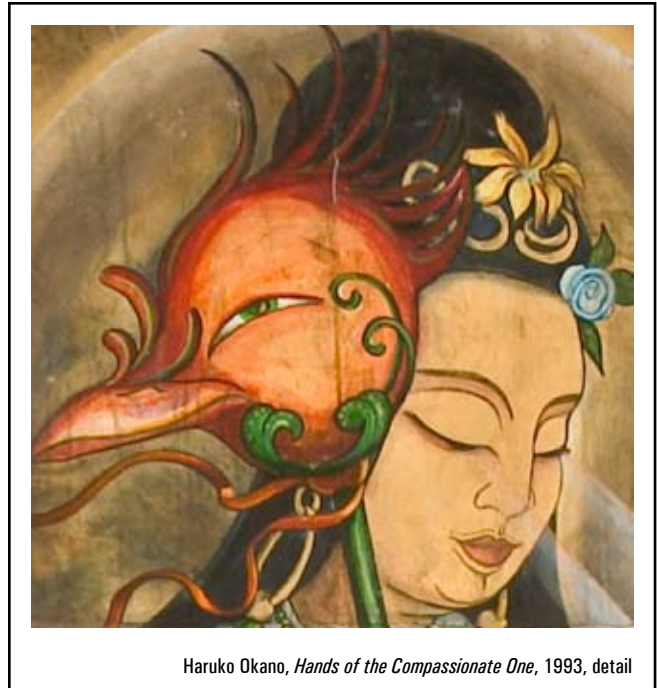
In Okano's dream, Kwan-yin's robes fell away revealing her pregnant belly; beneath her transparent skin, animal forms appeared to be moving and shifting. In *Hands of the Compassionate One*, the artist translates these subcutaneous creatures into Japanese-style tattoos, while maintaining the sense of their movement and vitality. She also portrays the goddess's flesh-and-blood power and robustness, a distinct impression of her dream. On the surface of the painting, the clouds on which Kwan-yin stands and the burning globe she holds in her left hand suggest air and fire respectively. In the second-layer representation of the goddess, there are depictions of goldfish, dragonflies, frogs, and other creatures associated with water. Beneath it, on the third layer,



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plants and leaves associated with earth are depicted, along with male and female demons. Thus the four elements are invoked.

In the uppermost image, the burning globe suggests the desperate social, political and environmental condition of our planet. Whether the rays emanating from the goddess's eyes are creating the fire or extinguishing it remains a mystery, even to the artist. (Viewers are invited to interpret it as they see fit.) Less of a riddle is the bird mask the goddess holds on a stick in her right hand: this is a representation of the phoenix, a legendary bird of ancient Arabia, later adopted into Christian symbolism. It was said to set fire to itself every 500 years and then to rise again from the ashes of its own destruction. In *Hands*, the phoenix functions in its Western form as a symbol of self-sacrifice and resurrection, and interacts with the Buddhist imagery in what seems to be a plea for cultural and religious tolerance and for recognition of our shared humanity. The animals and plants imaged here suggest our connection with and responsibility for the natural world. And the phoenix, again, can be read as a metaphor for Okano's personal journey: her adult rebirth as an artist and poet -- and a person of strong spiritual and political convictions -- from the ashes of her traumatic childhood. It is as if the Goddess of Compassion had presented herself in Okano's dream to relieve her of her suffering and bestow upon her an image of understanding and renewal.



Haruko Okano, *Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993, detail

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Notes:

1. Alexandra Margharitis, *Gallery Newsletter* (West Kootenay National Exhibition Centre, Winter/Spring 1996), p.1.
2. Haruko Okano, undated artist's statement (Vancouver Art Gallery library).
3. Haruko Okano, in an interview with the author April 17, 2007.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Arthur Cotterell, *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford & Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 119.

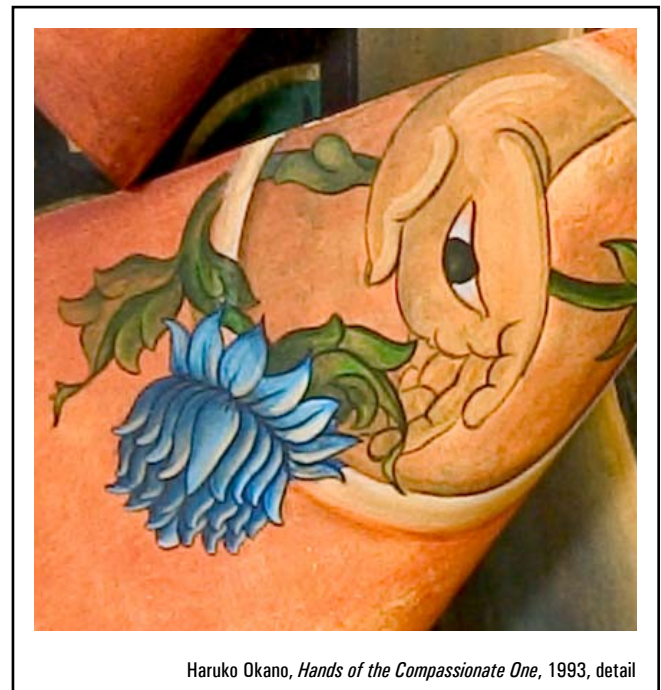
## Artist's Statement

As an artist/writer it has been difficult to neutralize the overwhelming impact of western aesthetics and values on the development of my own expression as a *Nikkei* (Japanese-Canadian). Hampered by the cultural estrangement I experienced in my early life, my exploration began with the obvious, the well known, the stereotypes accepted by much of the western society. But as I continue, my images are being refined by my reclamation of a personal cultural identity so that the blatancy lessens and I have more freedom to explore deeper into compositional structure, trusting that my expression will eventually produce a wholesome balance between Japanese and Western heritages.

The freedom to develop my own Japanese-Canadian identity and aesthetics against the pull of assimilation has been difficult having to crosscheck my own internalized assumptions and the Eurocentric biases of my western art training. Progress is slow and I still haven't reached a satisfactory balance, yet it is this very process that informs me of the hardships of my people and makes me appreciate the endurance and strengths I have inherited from the first two generations... the *Issei* and *Nisei*.

So then it comes to no surprise that as my self identity becomes visible and stronger under my own efforts, I have become active in areas of Human Rights, race equality and cultural representation in the Arts. In the last two years I have become a grassroots Human Rights activist, developing and facilitating workshops, lecturing to art institutes and university students and teachers and taking part in discussions with all levels of government on race, accessibility and equality for artists of colour. During a three-month grant from the cross-cultural funding department of the provincial government I did some

research into five local communities of colour to develop a report on these issues as seen from their perspective. By the restrictive values of western society on the role of non-occidental cultures I as an artists have no choice but to be political or to make socially engaging images if I am to remain visible and hold a space to determine my own representation.



Haruko Okano, *Hands of the Compassionate One*, 1993, detail



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