

AWAACC Presents Tim Okamura's ONNA-BUGEISHA: WARRIORS OF LIGHT Exhibition

This exhibition marks Okamura's first major institutional solo exhibition and promises to captivate audiences with its series of large-scale works.

By: Stephi Wild Aug. 01, 2023



The **August Wilson** African American Cultural Center has announced the highly anticipated exhibition, *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light*, featuring the captivating works of Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Tim Okamura. Curated by Karla Ferguson of Miami's Yeelen Group, this exhibition marks Okamura's first major institutional solo exhibition and promises to captivate audiences with its series of large-scale works, paintings, and installations.

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"It is a great honor for me to be curating this compelling visual storytelling that bridges several cultures with a common mission to positively impact society and inspire the everyday warriors amongst us to continue the fight against oppression as well as those that would like to join; we are strong when we are united" said Karla Ferguson, curator.

Tim Okamura's *Onna Bugeisha: Warriors of Light* emanates a sense of power, pride, and beauty that draw from a rich multicultural visual language," said Kimberly Jacobs, Assistant Curator at the **August Wilson** African American Cultural Center. "We are honored to present Okamura's largest solo exhibition in the US to our community."

Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light is a new artistic endeavor in which Tim Okamura imagines an alternate reality - a society that closely mirrors our own, which was once

liberated and equitable, but is now experiencing a rapid descent into a state of oppression due to the rise in power of an authoritarian regime. It is under these conditions, in a shift towards a riotous dystopia, that an astounding development has occurred: the sudden appearance of a clandestine group of women warriors – freedom fighters guided by the Bushido, or Code of the Samurai - sworn to battle back the forces of persecution and injustice at all costs.

Naming themselves the Onna-Bugeisha, the Japanese term for female Samurai, they are a noble company of mystical soldiers, champions of virtue, disciples of ancient wisdom, and protectors of morality and the common good. They are masters of the martial arts, wielding their “Weapons of Truth” with precision and devastating power only in the most severe circumstances, when diplomacy has failed. When called to action the Onna-Bugeisha fight with honor, discipline, and great courage. They defend the defenseless, bring hope to the hopeless, and persevere no matter how extreme or perilous the conditions or how great the self-sacrifice. The Onna-Bugeisha are driven by the pursuit of their ultimate goal - to end the rule of tyranny and spark the transformative fire that will lead to a revolution of consciousness and the triumph of love and altruism. They are also known by another name: The Warriors of Light.

“As a samurai, I must strengthen my character; as a human being I must perfect my spirit.” – Yamaoka Tesshu

The lore surrounding the Onna-Bugeisha continues to evolve – although some plausible origin theories have been put forth, most details surrounding their emergence remain shrouded in mystery. Members of this band of fearsome warriors will only divulge that their formation was “born out of necessity”, heeding the clarion call for justice, galvanized by the universal laws of Inspired Action and Divine Oneness.

Despite a lack of information surrounding their recruitment, elite training, covert means of communication and underground operational bases, there is one common consensus - the Warriors of Light always materialize during the most desperate situations. It is in the darkest hour they appear from the shadows, charging headlong into battle, bringing salvation.

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.” – Sun Tzu

Although the Onna-Bugeisha have suffered many grievous losses of illustrious heroes from within their ranks, it has not been in vain - each who has fallen has been crucial in advancing the greater cause. Considerable optimism fuels the fight as the Onna-Bugeisha sense victory is indeed possible against the extremist forces that conspire to crush freedom of choice, deny women's rights, destroy democratic institutions, and persecute and punish those that want to live uniquely and love authentically.

Without fail, the Onna-Bugeisha hold fast their vow to serve as irrepressible enemies of despotism and embrace their role as the antidote to those who crave to disseminate the poisons of prejudice, racism and bigotry.

Though each of these guardians is individually formidable, it is through harnessing the overwhelming power of Unity in Diversity that they find their greatest strength. Ultimately, theirs is a mission of enlightenment, equality, and inclusion which will be accomplished through the Way of the Samurai.

“Today is victory over yourself of yesterday; tomorrow is victory over those seeking your oppression. A warrior is worthless unless she rises above the flailing masses and stands strong in the midst of a storm.” – Onna-Bugeisha maxim, adapted from an original quote by Tsunetomo Yamamoto

Following this narrative, Tim Okamura positions himself as the artist given the honor of being allowed behind the veil of secrecy, in order to document the heroes, their exploit and accomplishments and the growing legend of the wondrous Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light.

FROM THE ARTIST: “I’m extremely honored to have the opportunity to debut my new series Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light at the **August Wilson** African American Cultural Center. I was inspired to explore a story of BIPOC women as a band of Samurai warriors as a reaction to learning of the story of Yasuke, acknowledged as the first Black Samurai, as well as Tomoe Gozen, a legendary female Samurai from feudal Japan. It brought about the idea of bringing to life female Samurai in a contemporary setting. Other influences came from the **Jim Jarmusch** film ‘Ghost Dog:

Way of the Samurai', Akira Kurosawa's 'Ran', **Haruki Kadokawa's** "Heaven and Earth' – a film I was in, as a Samurai extra – and yes, even 'Kill Bill'.

Importantly, I also feel that this series gives me a chance to take the next step in investigating individual and cultural identity. My hope is that it works on multiple levels. I'm exploring uncharted territory through this narrative in combining my passion for representation, most often focused on African American women, and historical aspects – even tropes - of my own identity and Japanese Canadian heritage. It's likely that the inherent juxtaposition that will draw attention to questions encompassing observing, honoring, and experiencing an exchange of cultures. Usually, it is the contrast that registers first but upon deeper contemplation I love those breakthrough moments when we see similarities in aesthetics and the commonalities of our perception and human experience shine through with the brightest light.

I'm continuing to process different aspects of what the Onna-Bugeisha: 'Warriors of Light' series means, it's certainly meant to provoke thought about equality, race, and gender and human dignity - but there is also a specific built-in comment on the oppression of women in Japanese society, a condition which still exists today. I wanted to address that by taking the stereotype of the traditional Samurai and flip it on its head. It's not my intention to openly cause offense or create controversy but I think sometimes as artists we must accept the role of provocateur, particularly if it may lead to meaningful thought that affects change.

The Warriors of Light are obviously metaphors as well, representing the warriors for social justice in our society. I wanted to celebrate, in a symbolic way, individuals who, despite adversity, continue to fight tooth and nail for fairness, equality, and human dignity. Their stories are imbued in these paintings also, as a testament to the power of the human spirit, and my aim is to honor their efforts and raise awareness through my art. I've always championed women in my work, but these paintings are overtly images of champions, of heroes."

Onna Bugeisha: Warriors of Light promises to ignite conversations and inspire viewers with its powerful imagery. The **August Wilson** African American Cultural Center remains committed to showcasing diverse and influential artistic voices that reflect and celebrate the African American experience.

The October 12th opening of the exhibition offers an unprecedented opportunity for art lovers, critics, and collectors to experience Okamura's compelling new series which underscores his commitment to leveraging art to bridge cultural gaps, challenge preconceptions, and inspire social change. This collection invites viewers to not just observe, but to engage, reflect, and participate in the conversation.

For more information, please visit awaacc.org

Painting Bravery

A portrait artist tries to capture the remarkable spirit of nurses on the front lines of the pandemic



Tamika Dennis, a nurse at Phoebe Putney
Memorial Hospital in Albany, Ga.

Story and paintings by **Tim Okamura**

JUNE 2, 2021



O



ne day in March 2020

I started coughing,
and thus began my
months-long battle

with covid-19. It was

the same day my beloved cousin
Bob succumbed to the disease in an
intensive care unit in Tokyo. He had
been on the Diamond Princess
cruise ship with his wife, daughter
and son-in-law for an anniversary
celebration, and that journey
quickly transformed into a
nightmare.

I live in Bushwick, Brooklyn, across
the street from Wyckoff Heights
Medical Center, where the first
patient to die of covid in New York
had been treated. By the end of
March there was a constant hum on
my block caused by the generators
of three large, white refrigerator
trucks, all serving as temporary
storage for covid victims. The
hospital morgue had reached
capacity, and from my kitchen
window it became a regular
occurrence to see men in masks,
gloves and plastic gowns exit a side
door of the hospital with rolling

stretchers carrying shrouded bodies that the men then pushed up a ramp to the back of a particular truck.

After a few weeks I started to get some strength back. Every day I would watch nurses and doctors and support staff trudge by on their way to and from long shifts at the hospital. They looked anxious and exhausted. It was hard to imagine the full scope of the horror they were dealing with daily.

At 7 each night, what seemed like most people in the neighborhood would clap, whistle, bang pots and pans, and honk car horns to show respect for the workers' efforts. Around this time, my upstairs neighbor made a large banner that read "Thank You Wyckoff Hospital Staff!" and hung it on the side of our apartment building facing the hospital. That gesture left me deeply inspired.

I've been an artist for more than 30 years, and I primarily paint people in a manner best described as "realism." Most of my work has employed traditional materials, using oil paint on canvas in an

attempt to create the most lifelike rendition possible of my subjects. My struggle with covid was taxing — a combination of extreme fatigue and feeling listless and unfocused — but when I saw that banner, I realized I should do something more than just make noise each night. I became motivated to get back in the studio. I decided that if I painted portraits of front-line workers, I would at least be doing my own small part to pay tribute to them.

Read more

[Inside one of the biggest public service campaigns in U.S. history: selling the coronavirus vaccines to uneasy Americans](#)

[The isolation of the pandemic caused her to form a new and intense relationship to nature. She was hardly alone.](#)

Then I happened to see a story on the “Today” show about nurses coming to New York. One nurse explained her decision to leave her family and travel across the country to our city, which at that time was the worst covid hot spot in the country. I took a screenshot of her to use as reference — and, fighting through the fatigue and headaches, I got back in front of my easel.

About 10 days later, I had created a portrait I called “Traveling Nurse,” which was the beginning of what would become a larger project I now refer to as my “Healthcare Heroes” series.

With this first painting I was doing something I almost never do: portraying a person I hadn’t met. Yet I felt a connection because of her honesty and humility in her interview. It was also my first time painting someone wearing a mask; one of the biggest challenges was trying to capture her sensitivity while being able to see only her eyes. Finishing this painting made me want to meet the subjects of my next paintings in person. To better represent these nurses, I had to know more about their stories and hear directly from them.

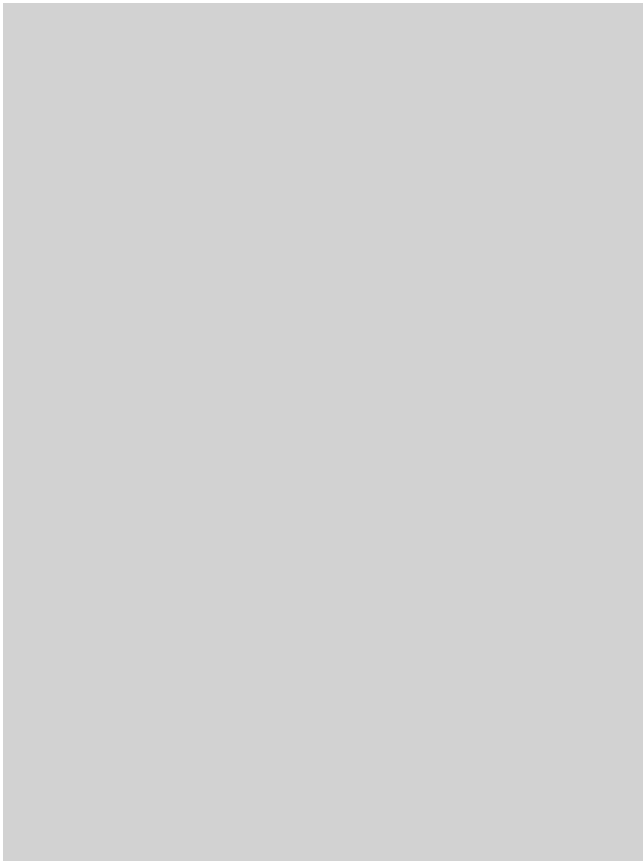


The artist at work on "Grief," a large painting featuring nurse Amy O'Sullivan, right, comforting nurse Tiffany Latz. O'Sullivan was featured on the cover of Time magazine last fall. (Kerry Thompson)

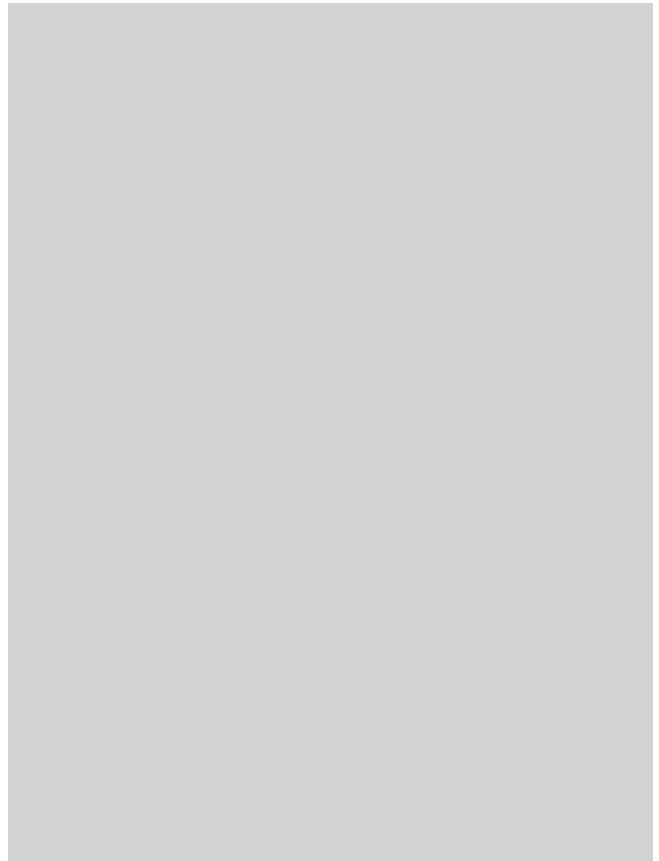
I posted to Instagram a brief account of my struggle and my intention to get back to work. A follower in Canada mentioned she was close with a nurse who headed up the covid unit at NYU Langone Hospital, also in Brooklyn. She said she had heard heartbreaking stories of her friend's experience there. I asked if she could connect me. By the end of May I was invited to the hospital to meet the team of nurses there.

Several of the nurses related highly emotional stories of trauma and

loss. In our conversations they described an unprecedented number of patients, a shortage of beds, and stretchers lining the hallways — with no end in sight to the suffering. They were drained emotionally and physically, but they had to stay professional, they said, and compartmentalize the pain to keep doing their jobs.



LEFT: “Nurse Tracey,” featuring Tracey-Ann Knight, a nurse at NYU Langone Hospital in Brooklyn.



RIGHT: “PPE,” with nurse Jennie Vasquez of NYU Langone Hospital.

After that, we stepped into a room that had been part of the expanded covid ward so they could pose for reference photographs, which I would use to paint from. More than

anything, I wanted to simply capture the nurses' faces. I've always felt faces tell the story of one's life, but I hoped in this case that their faces might be able to represent the lived experience of front-line health-care workers everywhere.

I always try to stay open to unexpected moments, and when nurse Jennie Vasquez put on her personal protective equipment and I saw the way light played off her plastic gown and face mask, I knew I had to create that painting. It showcased the "armor" that nurses had as their only defense against the virus.

For the final photos of the session, I asked a nurse named Tracey-Ann Knight if she'd be willing to pose, and as soon as she did — flexing heroically while wearing her mask — I knew it was what I needed. She was confident and bright-eyed and exuded vitality. Quite often I find that the energy someone projects is more important to the success of a painting than their physical attributes, and her energy was perfect.

After we wrapped up, I returned to my studio and began to try to do justice to the full range of experiences they had relayed to me. Though I now had some captivating imagery to work with that represented the courage and camaraderie of the nurses, I also realized that not every painting could be a larger-than-life hero pose. I needed to depict the sense of sorrow and loss they felt, too.

Eventually I met two nurses, Tiffany Latz and Amy O'Sullivan, from Wyckoff hospital, who were willing to come to my studio to recount their most difficult moments during the height of the [pandemic](#). Their accounts were devastating. What came out of that was a first for me: a portrait of someone crying. I called that painting "Grief."



“Two Front War,” based on a selfie taken by Laura Mansfield, who was head of nursing at NYU Langone, lower left.

As the work went on, I was able to coordinate more pose sessions with nurses from New York, Washington and Georgia, either in my studio or by giving direction via FaceTime. It’s been an unexpected dividend that seemingly every session has produced profound conversation, usually starting with anecdotes

about the nurses' fight against covid but often branching out into ruminations on life itself. What has struck me while listening to the stories has been the commonality of the emotional and psychological toll the experience has had on them. Yet almost all of them also explained that this was simply what they were trained to do. One nurse told me, "Thank you for calling us heroes, but really this is just my job."

While taking a break from painting to get my second vaccination dose several weeks ago, I was talking with the nurse administering the shot and found myself thanking her as she injected the needle. She laughed and asked what I did for a living, so I took out my phone and pulled up several portraits of the nurses. "Wow! These look so real!" she exclaimed and called over a few other nurses to show them the work. They were doing their job with such conviction and determination, these nurses, and for now I was trying my best to do the same.



"Nurse Patti," a portrait of traveling nurse Patricia Lafontant.


Tim Okamura is an artist in New York.

Design by Christian Font.



"Full Bloom." All images © Tim Okamura, shared with permission

Women Warriors Confront History and Contemporary Issues in
Tim Okamura's Striking Portraits

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“This is a time when a woman’s right to choose, and to have a voice in decision-making on every level, has already been compromised with threats of even further subjugation,” says artist [Tim Okamura](#), whose striking portraits ([previously](#)) emphasize the profound strength and resilience of women.

Often gazing directly at the viewer, Okamura’s subjects confront history while standing squarely in the present and looking toward the future. In his ongoing *Women Warriors* series, individuals don stunning, traditional garments and wield swords, fans, or scythes. His solo exhibition *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light* at the [August Wilson African American Cultural Center](#) celebrates those who fight for social justice and for a better society.

Okamura became fascinated by the history of *onna-bugeisha*, also known as *onna-musha*, when he learned the story of [Tomoe Gozen](#), a legendary female samurai from Japan’s late Heian period (794-1185 C.E.). She is famous for having led 300 women samurai into battle against an enemy army 2,000 strong and was one of only five to survive.



“Northern Emissaries”

“I think the fact that the female samurai fought alongside men and had the same responsibilities and expectations resonated with me deeply,” Okamura says, “especially because as a person of Japanese descent, I was aware of a historically male-dominated, sometimes misogynist society, which I always found difficult to reconcile as someone who identifies as a feminist.”

Many of Okamura’s portraits depict influential contemporary women, such as Nigerian-American writer and speaker Luvvie Ajayi Jones. Myriad other subjects, who often wear flowers in their hair, tap into a universal sense of uplifting others and striving for representation, equality, and empowerment. “I believe the role of the artist is to open up avenues to alternate, constructive pathways and to establish new visions through elevated narratives,” he adds.

Okamura’s work is currently on view in a solo exhibition titled *Support System* at Blumka Contemporary in New York City, and *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light* continues through February 18, 2025, in Pittsburgh. Find more on the artist’s [website](#) and [Instagram](#).



"Luvvie Ajayi"

Advertisement



“Ebony Obsidian the Unbreakable”



"Yaya the Demon Slayer"



"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"



"Fire Walk With Me"



"Encouraging Words (Omoiyari)"

Artist Paints Striking Portraits of Real Women of Color as Fearless Female Warriors

By Regina Sienna on August 5, 2024



“Ebony Obsidian the Unbreakable”

Artist **Tim Okamura** first heard about Tomoe Gozen, a *Onna-Bugeisha* or “woman warrior” about 10 years ago, but the story stuck with him ever since. “I think the fact that the female samurai fought alongside men, had the same responsibilities and expectations resonated with me deeply,” he tells My Modern Met. In this figure, he found a creative engine, sparking a powerful series of paintings titled *Onna-Bugeisha*, where women of color are ready to take a stand and emerge victorious in a dystopian near future.

Okamura felt drawn to depict women from underrepresented communities both due to having grown up with a diverse group of friends and the lack of representation in portraits he saw in the galleries and museums he visited. “I felt called to consciously focus on creating work, specifically portraits based in an academic tradition, of people who were missing from the museums, people of color, whose stories deserved to be captured on canvas, with great care and reverence,” he says.

In his paintings, women don ornate kimonos and traditional garments, but also hold katanas with a defying look in their eyes. The highly realistic approach goes beyond Okamura's proficient use of light and shadow in their expression. He expertly depicts the veins and bruises on their arms, as well as the texture of natural hair. While hands have been a perennial challenge for painters, Okamura appears to depict them effortlessly, even reveling in painting them in different poses.

FEATURED VIDEO



"The Northern Emissaries"

The artist shares that he has always loved the challenge of painting faces and putting human stories on canvas, which has in turn influenced his style. "Portraying someone in a way that both celebrates them as an individual and points to a larger metaphor for the human condition has always been important to me. Therefore I've always worked in the mode of realism. I think my technique has developed over time to be more impasto (thicker paint), textured, and with more push and pull on the paint surface, and with more exploration of abstraction, or micro-abstraction, in my backgrounds."

The women depicted in his paintings are all real women he knows personally and commends for their positive energy. "At the risk of sounding cliché, seeing the inner light projecting outward as an important consideration when choosing my subjects, whether the painting is about them specifically, or whether they are playing a role, such as that of a female Samurai, as in the *Onna-Bugeisha* series," Okamura says. "I feel very fortunate that I've found such great alignment with the spirit of the work, and the women who have participated in the process. Having an energetic connection I think is key to creating the best work possible."

Aware of the threat women's rights are facing around the world, Okamura felt compelled to create this group of fearless heroes. "I believe the role of the artist is to open up avenues to alternate, constructive pathways and to establish new visions through elevated narratives," he concludes. "I hope the *Onna-Bugeisha* series will inspire viewers to get unstuck from the muck and mire of discrimination and prejudice and can offer inspiration for a better future women warriors will play a key role in building."

Artist Tim Okamura paints striking portraits where women of color are ready to take a stand and emerge victorious in a dystopian near future.



"Yaya the Demon Slayer"

He was inspired by the story of Tomoe Gozen, a Onna-Bugeisha or "woman warrior." These

female samurai fought alongside men, and had the same responsibilities and expectations.



"The Expectant Guard"

In his paintings, women of color are highlighted as fearless leaders.



"The Fatal Crane"

The subjects don ornate kimonos and traditional garments, but also hold katanas with a defying look in their eyes.



"Lethal Hummingbird and Golden Fox"

The highly realistic approach goes beyond Okamura's proficient use of light and shadow in their expression—he also excels at depicting hands, skin, and natural hair.



"Luminescence"



“Conduit _ Conductor”

Okamura felt drawn to depict women from underrepresented communities both due to having grown up with a diverse group of friends and the lack of representation in portraits.



"Lighthouse Fire"

LIFESTYLE

Tim Okamura's 'Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light' Exhibition Shines a Spotlight on Social Justice Warriors



by Andrew S. Jacobson

September 11, 2023

私は刀を携え正義を望む
女戦国時代の武士だ

母は未来に起こるべく戦を感じた
だから私を戦うために育てたのだ



Tim Okamura's "Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light" premieres Oct. 12 at Pittsburgh's August Wilson African American Cultural Center.
(Courtesy photo)

When Tim Okamura's paintings arrive at a gallery, they resonate.

With Okamura's work already garnering attention in the D.C. area, his new exhibition, "Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light," which premieres in November at Pittsburgh's August Wilson African American Cultural Center (AWAACC), promises to be a landmark event in the artist's ascending career.

Canadian-born and Brooklyn-based, Okamura has left a significant imprint on Smithsonian art enthusiasts. His inclusion in the esteemed "Outwin: American Portraiture Today" exhibition cemented his reputation, aligning him with luminaries such as Amy Sherald, the artist behind former first lady Michelle Obama's White House portrait.

The artist's influence extends to the political sphere as well. Back in 2015, he received a letter from now-President Joseph R. Biden Jr., acknowledging his artistic contributions to criminal justice reform.

‘Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light’

Curated by Karla Ferguson of Miami's Yeelen Group, the upcoming exhibition is a narrative series of large-scale works, paintings and installations. "Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light" dives into an alternate reality where a group of women warriors rise against an authoritarian regime.

Drawing upon his own Japanese-Canadian heritage, and the influence of pop culture and historical figures, Okamura offers a tale of resistance with multi-cultural richness.

"Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light" is a new direction in my lifelong quest to explore cultural identity," said Okamura. "This series is a testament to the power of the human spirit, particularly focusing on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIOPIC) women as a band of Samurai warriors, echoing the real-life stories of heroes like Yasuke, the first Black Samurai, and legendary female Samurai Tomoe Gozen."

While the exhibition's storyline and imagery are fantastical, the themes are pointedly real. Okamura fearlessly confronts issues like oppression, women's rights, and the erosion of democratic institutions.

Kimberly Jacobs, assistant curator at AWAACC, explained the exhibition emanates "a sense of power, pride, and beauty that draws from a rich multicultural visual language."

Okamura's "Warriors of Light" aren't just a painted army; they're an allegory for social justice warriors of today. These women are embodying resilience, unity, and the fight for a better world.

“Their stories are imbued in these paintings as a testament to the power of the human spirit,” Okamura shared. “And my aim is to honor their efforts and raise awareness through my art.”

Named after the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, the AWAAC said Okamura’s exhibit is a further extension of the arts organization’s commitment to showcasing diverse artistic voices.

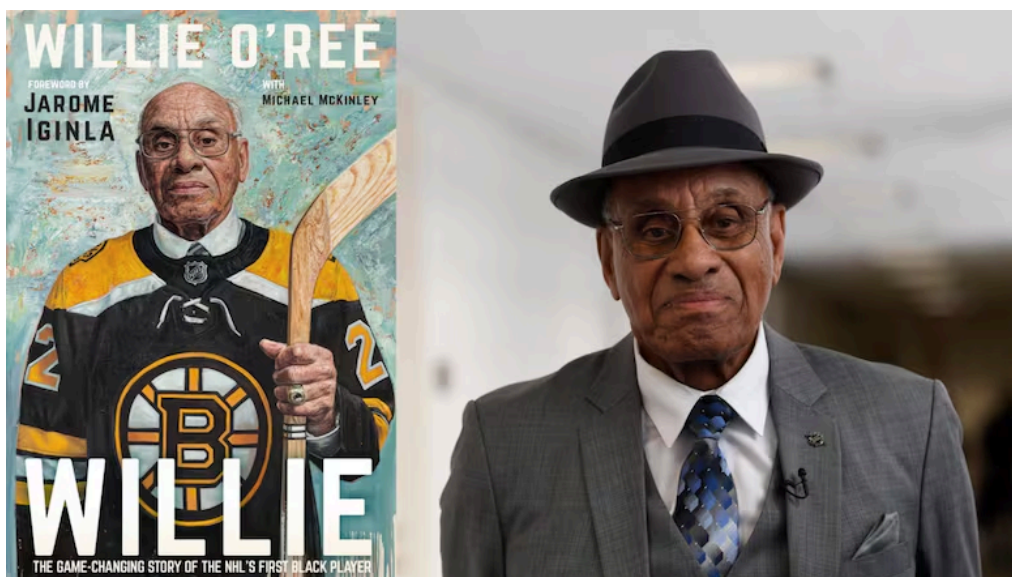
“We are honored to present Okamura’s largest solo exhibition in the U.S. to our community,” Jacobs said. “The exhibition is set to open on Nov. 9, providing a platform for dialogue that is expected to engage and inspire not just art critics and collectors but a broader audience attuned to social change.”

New Brunswick

Portrait of Willie O'Ree, first Black player in NHL, to be unveiled at Beaverbrook Art Gallery

Willie O'Ree, the first Black man to play in the NHL, will have a portrait of himself on display

CBC News · Posted: Jan 12, 2023 2:56 PM EST | Last Updated: January 12, 2023



The portrait has also been featured on the cover of Willie O'Ree's autobiography Willie. (CBC Sports)

[comments](#)

One of Fredericton's most famous figures will have a special place on the walls of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery for years to come.

Willie O'Ree — who became the first Black man to play in the NHL when he laced up for the Boston Bruins in 1958 — is the subject of a portrait expected to be a fixture at the gallery.

The portrait will be unveiled Jan. 18, the 65th anniversary of his first NHL game. The Bruins faced off against the Montreal Canadiens.

O'Ree would go on to play 45 games for the Bruins over two seasons, scoring four goals and 10 assists.

- [Fredericton-born Willie O'Ree to receive U.S. Congressional Gold Medal](#)

- [Willie O'Ree's number retired by Boston Bruins](#)

He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2018.

John Leroux, manager of collections and exhibitions at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery said the painting is five feet by five feet, and is larger than the gallery thought it was going to be.

"It's actually about 30 per cent larger than life size," said Leroux.

"When you see it on the wall, it really has a strong presence. It's a beautiful, beautiful painting of this absolutely respected and revered and important living Frederictonian."

Canadian artist

The painting — made possible because of an anonymous donation — is the work of Tim Okamura, an Edmonton-born artist who now lives in New York.

Okamura, who has Japanese ancestry through his father and Atlantic Canadian roots through his Newfoundland-born mother, has established himself as a major figure in the arts world.

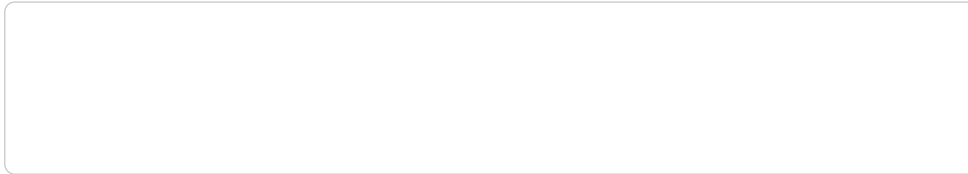


Tim Okamura, an Edmonton-born artist who now lives in New York, painted the portrait of Willie O'Ree.
(Submitted by Tim Okamura)

"He's also been shown at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery," said Leroux. "He's been given a commendation by then-vice president Joe Biden on his work for really promoting racial equality."

LeRoux said Okamura's experience as a racialized Canadian allows him to closely connect with O'Ree's story as he understands marginalization.

"He paints a lot of people of colour ... the idea of showing their inner strength and their resoluteness, and he's extremely successful at it," said Leroux.



"His work is amazing. It's got a lot of power and strength."

Well known portrait

The portrait has also been featured on the cover of O'Ree's autobiography *Willie*.

"It's full of energy. It doesn't feel formal. It feels exciting," said Leroux.

Okamura will attend the unveiling of the painting, while O'Ree will attend and speak remotely from his home in California.

*For more stories about the experiences of Black Canadians — from anti-Black racism to success stories within the Black community — check out *Being Black in Canada*, a CBC project Black Canadians can be proud of. [You can read more stories here.](#)*



(CBC)

With files from Information Morning Fredericton

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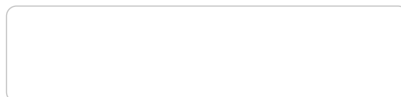
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Bushwick Painter Honors Brave Nurses During the Pandemic

Brianna Lopez
Jul 13, 2021 8:08 AM



Tim Okamura with his painting "PPE" in progress. Photo: Provided.

As a ten-year-old boy, Tim Okamura's parents enrolled him in a painting class where he began what would become a life-long journey of bringing stories to life on canvas. When he first picked up a paintbrush, Okamura knew that he had a knack for portraiture — telling the stories of other humans.

Now, the 53-year-old Bushwick painter has channeled that knack into a series of paintings he calls "Healthcare Heroes." The series features nurses who have worked tirelessly during the

pandemic.

In March 2020, Okamura found out his cousin passed away from COVID-19 on the same day he discovered he had the virus.

"I was still processing the loss of my cousin and I was quite ill myself. I was looking out my window and seeing bodies being wheeled into refrigerator trucks," Okamura said. "Not one, not two, but three trucks."

Wyckoff Heights Medical Center, which he lives across the street from, had become overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients and the morgue was at capacity.

One day, Okamura saw a "Today" show interview featuring travelling nurses who had come to New York in the height of the pandemic. One nurse inspired him enough to create a painting called "Travelling Nurses."

Later, an Instagram follower discovered Okamura's work and put him in touch with nurses from NYU Langone in Brooklyn. These nurses later became the subjects in two paintings, titled "PPE" and "Nurse Tracey."

The latter is what Okamura referred to as "Rosie the Riveter Part Two," representing the strength and courage that nurses have maintained during the pandemic.

In highlighting strength, Okamura knew he also needed to show the moments of anguish. In a painting titled, "Nurse Patti," a nurse is looking "heavenward," which Okamura believes "captured the moment in between despair and prayer."

He was later able to talk to two nurses from Wyckoff Heights Medical Center. Okamura asked them what the toughest part of working during the pandemic was. While they discussed pediatric cases, the nurses began to cry.

This image became Okamura's "Grief," which is the first time he'd ever painted someone crying.

"I think a lot of nurses were compartmentalizing their feelings to stay professional," Okamura said. "But it was important for me to show that side of things."

As a Japanese and Canadian artist, Okamura began painting portraiture when he was a child by using his diverse circle of friends as subjects. Depicting his companions — who were from Trinidad, Jamaica and Guyana — was the beginning of a "path of representation" for Okamura.

His journey to create art that adds "imagery to the canon of traditional academic portraiture" has continued into his portraits of nurses. Okamura believes these paintings will serve as a reminder of an extremely important historical period in Brooklyn and beyond.

In completing these paintings, however, Okamura had a much larger realization.

"These nurses and workers were always there for us," Okamura said. "It took the pandemic to shine a spotlight on their efforts. It wasn't just for this period of time — it's been that way for their whole career."

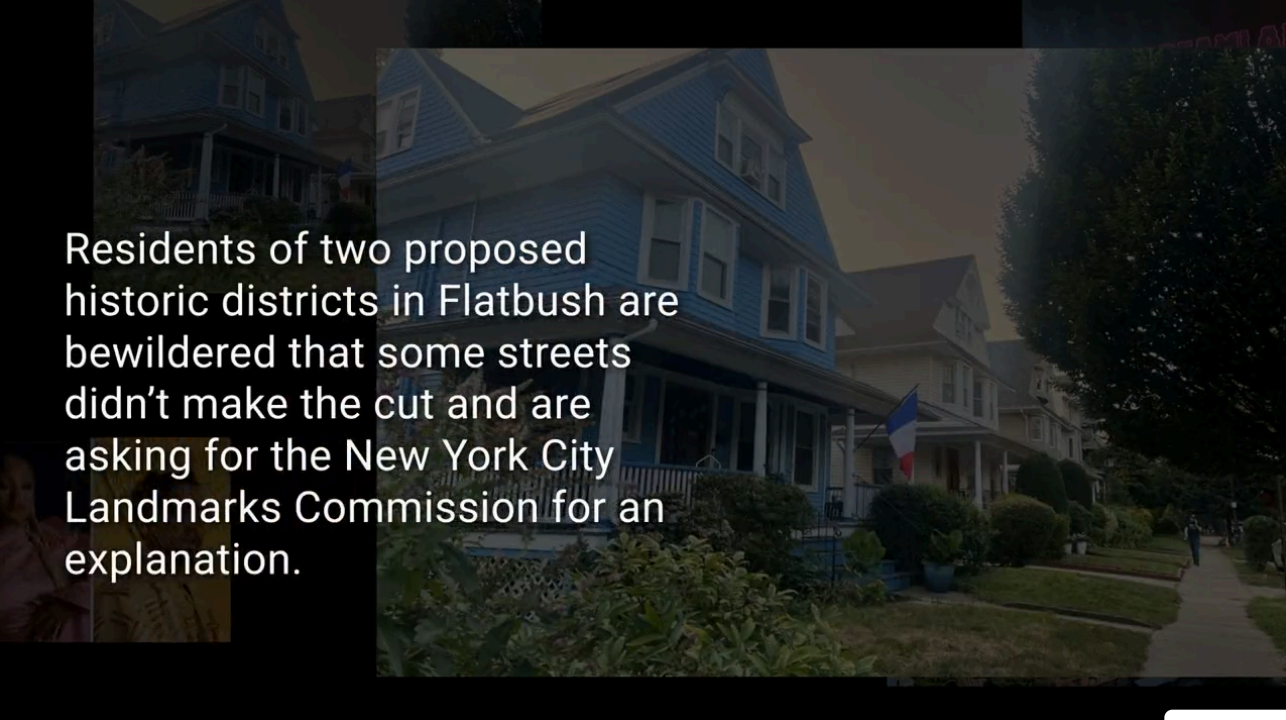
With this realization came Okamura's need to express gratitude to these nurses. He does this through his art.

While he didn't begin this series for personal benefit, the experience has been rewarding. Beyond the heartfelt messages from frontline healthcare workers, Okamura has had numerous opportunities to showcase his work.

The [New York Historical Society](#) has added his "Nurse Tracey" painting to their permanent collection. This is the collection's first portrait and second painting by an artist of Asian descent.

Okamura's biggest goal is to give back to the nurses whose stories he has depicted.

"Whether or not they want to be called heroes, I do regard them in a heroic way," Okamura said. "I don't think I could ever really do enough to do them justice, but I'm trying my best."

A photograph of a row of historic, two-story blue houses with white trim and porches, situated on a slight incline. The houses are surrounded by greenery and a sidewalk runs alongside them. The image is part of a video player interface.

Residents of two proposed historic districts in Flatbush are bewildered that some streets didn't make the cut and are asking for the New York City Landmarks Commission for an explanation.



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INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

Tim Okamura by Jessica Lanay

Painting empathy and resistance.

JANUARY 17, 2024



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Atinka-Fatal-Crane-Tim-Okamura1.jpg)

Tim Okamura, *Atinka the Fatal Crane*, 2023, oil, origami paper cranes, acrylic on wood panel, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

My first encounter with Tim Okamura's work was in a small, dimly lit gallery in a Brooklyn museum in 2012. The moderate relief from his art's build-up of paint gave me the impression of a physical body in the space, and—startled—I turned on the lights. The subject in Okamura's work was so present it seemed to have just finished exhaling. By doubling down on perfecting his technique of embodying the lesser-seen, Okamura critiques gallerists' rejection of his subjects as well as a national culture that is at best delusional about what equality and justice mean. Okamura's practice is profoundly meditated upon, and it tests how far his materials can be pushed to embody the subjectivity, humanity, and vulnerability of Black women and women of color in his community. Okamura wants the world to see the beauty, mutual aid, and culture that are the bedrocks of his reality.

—Jessica Lanay

Jessica Lanay

Your exhibition at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light* (<https://awaacc.org/exhibition/onna-bugeisha-warriors-of-light/>), is world-building through portraiture. How are you constructing the narrative?

Tim Okamura

I'm still discovering answers (*laughter*); there are so many different facets. The overarching theme of my work has been portraiture and representation, especially portraiture of women of color. Probably most of my subject matter is Black women in America. I delved into the idea of a narrative realm in a previous series from about ten years ago called *Ground Zero* (2013), which was representing women as boxers, as fighters. For *Onna-Bugeisha*, I wanted to push things further to allow for some magical realism and unexpected depictions of heroism that go beyond the regular. I realized that this is an alternate reality that very closely mirrors our own. We're dealing with extremism and authoritarian ambition, and there are people that harm other people. And we're all well aware. Part of this series is me imagining, What's our answer to that? This is where it crystallized: *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light*. They are a diverse group, primarily led by women of color. Even when Biden won the election and Stacey Abrams was like, You know who really saved the day here? Black women. I was like, Yeah, of course. That was in the back of my mind a little bit as I've been developing this series. I am also thinking about Yasuke, the first documented African samurai who fought for Oda Nobunaga. I think this exhibition is opening some creative doors for me, and I'm already envisioning chapter two; but I have to remain focused on chapter one and establish who the Onna-Bugeisha are, what the spirit of the show is.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Storm-Warrior-Tim-Okamura2.jpg)

Tim Okamura, *Storm Warrior (Knight & Squire)*, 2019, oil and aerosol on canvas, 76 x 60 inches. From the private collection of Margarita Sullivan. Courtesy of the artist.

A popular conversation in the zeitgeist is that of Black women being characterized as heroes and how that constitutes a prolonged attachment of Black women to tropes of service and strength. Do you address this conversation in the work?

TO

The Onna-Bugeisha work for no one. Part of the mythology is that we don't really know the genesis of this group of women warriors. But they're self-motivated, self-led. In the narrative, I position myself as an artist being given privileged access to document them. The women that sat for portraits are the Onna-Bugeisha. I use a lot of real names but give them titles fitting for their stature like *Atinka the Fatal Crane* (2023). I'm working on a painting called *Battle Cry (Empress Tyra and General Lo vs. The Parasite)* (2023) that features a friend of mine named Tyra Patterson, who was wrongfully convicted of homicide and spent twenty-three years in prison in Ohio and has been emancipated for five years. She's the de facto leader of the Onna-Bugeisha. I'm just kind of a midwife (*laughter*) for these images. I'll have the seed idea, but the way that things grow is really organic.

I don't think we are going to see the strong Black woman trope. Some of the upcoming imagery is showing battle scenes where some of the women are wounded or killed, where they are vulnerable. I'm sure cultural appropriation will come up, especially from those who don't understand that I am Japanese and from other communities too. I have to adhere to Samurai discipline (*laughter*) knowing that my mission is one of necessity and great intentions. If I can bring people into the Onna-Bugeisha world, get them asking questions or debating positively, then I've done my job as an artist.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Battle-Cry-Tim-Okamura3.jpg)

Tim Okamura, *Battle Cry (Empress Tyra and General Lo vs. The Parasite)*, 2023, collaboration with Woodz, acrylic, oil, oil paint marker on canvas, 108 × 102 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

JL

Your work builds from micro-abstraction to figures bordering on realism. Your canvases are thick with impasto; there is even a sculptural quality. What role does technique play in the narratives and personalities you paint?

TO

It is a long process of discovering what paint can do, how to best depict different textures, and what tools can do, whether I'm using a painting knife, brush, or aerosol paints. I ask myself, Does your technique serve your imagery? I do whatever I need to do to effectively represent the subject; the technique serves the subject. I was inspired by Lucian Freud, how impasto he

painted flesh. In terms of painting hair, which has been the subject of a few paintings of mine that have had good longevity, I had to discover a lot of that on my own. I couldn't go to the Met and say, Okay, how did this artist paint an afro? Because there simply were none. I also think in terms of being close to my subjects too, asking, How can I best represent your hair in a way that brings the energy and the feeling that I experience when I see you in person? And that's always the endgame. It's a balancing act between the realism that I want to achieve and honoring my subject. It can be very painstaking. I appreciate you noticing the sculptural aspects. Accuracy is the goal, but there's always going to be some distortions, and part of that just happens through my earnestness in trying to be accurate, which produces a less accurate but truer image.

"I do whatever I need to do to effectively represent the subject; the technique serves the subject."

— Tim Okamura

JL

In previous interviews you say that dedicating your career to painting people in your community helps you learn more about yourself as an artist and a human.

TO

It was in 1991 when I was in grad school that I first started exploring issues of race and identity. I remember very distinctly reading the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and it emotionally resonated with me. I've learned about my naivete as well; that's been a huge thing. At one point I was doing illustration, and I was doing storyboards for ad agencies; but when it came to my own work, there was a point where I said, Why would you paint people that you've seen painted hundreds, if not thousands, of times before? That's not your purpose. I remember the quote from a speech Malcolm X gave, I think in '64, saying, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman." I wanted to turn to depicting people from my world. It feels right to focus on representing women of color and particularly Black women. That idea probably has felt right to me for more than twenty years now. There's always been this strong energetic or emotional connection to my subjects. In some cases, I do have this feeling of family connection with friends and sitters. Often what people assume about my work couldn't be further from the truth; that's frustrating for me. I have to say, Listen, this is my life; you're looking at my life. Gallerists say, Can you paint less Black people? It's kind of hard to sell. And that is horrifying because, again, my whole thing is that I'm going to paint who I want to paint, who is in my life, and who I want to put my time and energy into celebrating.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Freedom-Fighters-Tim-Okamura4.jpg)

Tim Okamura, *Freedom Fighters*, 2017–23, paint marker, oil, mixed media on canvas, 144 x 208 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

JL

What skills were the hardest to learn for you as an artist, and what do you still struggle with?

TO

I can relate to the technical struggles of Rembrandt and his concern for paint. But his imagery is serving his technique. He may not have cared too much about the person he painted, but he was working on a way to be more efficient or more expressive with how to paint a fur collar or something like that. I look at my contemporaries too. How does Mickalene Thomas put together an image? And Amy Serrano has an inspiring economy of composition. I'm very fortunate to say I can call them friends also. Everybody loves Jean-Michel Basquiat; I really love that freedom that he had. Man, he just fucking grabbed this door and did his thing. I used to like to do that. Basquiat reminds me of things that inspired me long ago.

Technical skills are a matter of time and observation, and ambition in the sense of wanting to always get better. The day I die I'll be wishing that I knew how to paint jewelry better (*laughter*) or properly capture the subtleties of the cool notes in skin tones. I've had to work on my sensitivity and not feeling so wounded by criticism that it becomes paralyzing. I am completely fortunate to have had so much positive feedback and support along the way, but some people are going to hate you for what you do. It's difficult; I'm still working on it. I am trying to work out the systems that have abused us all to different degrees. My father was put in a Japanese internment camp; his family had everything taken from them by the government. I haven't

done paintings that are specifically about that, but that is part of my experience. When I see repression, or racism, or authoritarianism, it speaks to the core of who I am because of that personal history too. The fact that we question why we have empathy is another version of the horrors that humans can inflict upon each other. Those types of skills and understanding are super, super important to my craft.

Tim Okamura: *Onna-Bugeisha: Warriors of Light* (<https://awaacc.org/exhibition/onna-bugeisha-warriors-of-light/>) is *on view at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center in Pittsburgh until February 18.*

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Jessica Lanay is an interdisciplinary writer, poet, and art journalist currently based in Chicago. In 2020, she won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Prize for her debut poetry collection, *am•phib•ian*. Her poetry can be found in the University of Arizona Press anthology *When Language Broke Open: An Anthology of Queer and Trans Black Writers of Latin American Descent* (2023), *Poiesis*, *Poet Lore*, and *[PANK]*, among others. In 2020 and 2021, her poetry was commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Her essays can be found in *Black Warrior Review*, *Electric Literature*, and others. Her art writing can be found in Nona Faustine's monograph *White Shoes* from MACK Books, the Andy Warhol Museum's exhibition catalogue *Fantasy America*, and more recently in *Art Review*. She is a proud, frequent contributor to *BOMB*. For more information, visit [lanay.me](https://www.lanay.me) (<https://www.lanay.me>).

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Toni Morrison circa 1993

Set Against a Backdrop of World Events, Tim Okamura's Bold Portraits Emanate Commanding Energy

July 19, 2022

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Marked with visible brushstrokes and drips of paint, the portraits of [Tim Okamura](#) ([previously](#)) blend realistic portrayals of his subjects with the fervent, unrestrained qualities of street art. The Japanese-Canadian artist, who recently moved his studio from Brooklyn to Queens, centers his practice around storytelling and honing in on the distinctive energies of those he paints.

Much of Okamura's portraiture develops in series, whether as the *Healthcare Heroes* collection devoted to the nurses and doctors working tirelessly throughout the pandemic or the commanding figures of the ongoing *Women Warriors*—many of these works will be on view as a solo exhibition in September of 2023 at Pittsburgh's [August Wilson African American Cultural Center](#). Rendered primarily in oil with the occasional acrylic or spray paint addition, the pieces capture the raw nature of Okamura's process and the distinctive, powerful presence of his subjects.

If you're in Los Angeles, visit the [Academy Museum](#) to view the artist's portrait of the late writer Toni Morrison. Otherwise, find more of his paintings on [his site](#) and [Instagram](#), and browse limited-edition prints in [his shop](#).

Advertisement



"Fire Fighter" (2021), oil on canvas, 60 x 76 inches



"Nurse Tracy" (2021), oil on linen, 40 x 60 inches



"Blood, Sweat, and Tears (Portrait of the Artist Marc Andre)" (2022), oil on linen, 32 x 26 inches



"Rites of Spring" (2021), oil on canvas, 64 x 64 inches



"Rich Medina" (2022), oil on wood panel, 24 x 24 inches

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"Luminescence" (2022), oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches