

Ben Sakoguchi, Remember Me: AIDS (detail), 1992

# BEN SAKOGUCHI'S AMERICA

BY ANDREW PERCHUK

**B**en Sakoguchi is a contemporary painter of the American Scene. His work, however, employs neither the heroic romanticism of the Regionalists nor the unvarnished realism of the Social Realists, the two schools that dominated American painting of the 1930s. Nor does his work reflect the cold, distanced view of American consumer culture that distinguished the Pop 1960s. Rather, his work contains a scarcely controlled fury that reflects our times in paintings that utilize humor, irony, cartoon emotion, and biting sarcasm. Like the Pop painters, Sakoguchi accepts that the way we become cognizant of individuals or events is through media representation. But instead of blandly appropriating media images, Sakoguchi repackages, recontextualizes, re-presents, and subverts his source material; in the process he claims both the image and its message as his own and reinvests them with meaning.

Ben Sakoguchi was born in San Bernadino, California, in 1938. The defining experience of his childhood were the years he spent in an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. Sakoguchi's sole published interview details the consequences of his forced removal from American society, "The effects are almost subliminal — I know it affects my outlook — I've always felt I was an outsider — I never felt like I belonged — My aspirations are different — I don't care to make it in that circle — They took everything away and we came back with nothing."<sup>1</sup>

Sakoguchi's feelings of difference, of being an outsider, have influenced both his personal decisions and his work. In the

late 1970s, Sakoguchi chose to remove himself from the art market. Since then he has refused gallery representation and will not sell his work or become directly involved in its public dissemination. But rather than removing himself from society and retreating into an artistic ivory tower, Sakoguchi has been actively engaged throughout his career, and his subject has remained the American experience as it is defined by the pressing economic, cultural, and political issues of the day.

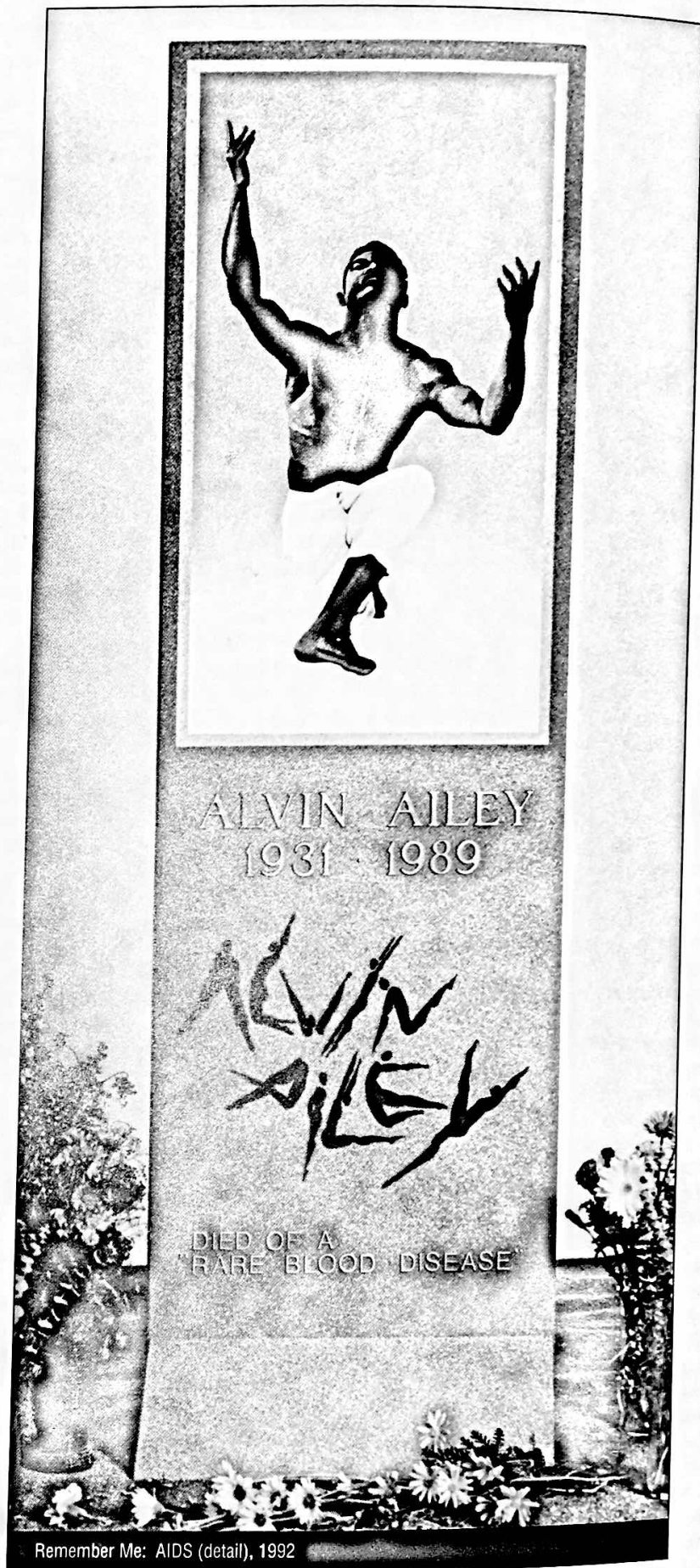
Sakoguchi's best-known body of work is the series of small, exquisitely rendered paintings known as the Orange Crate Labels (1974-81). In 1976, Sakoguchi explained the personal significance of the labels and his reasons for employing them as an artistic format. "My first recollection of citrus labels goes back to the period just after World War II. My parents had just started up their grocery store... after our years in relocation camp. Behind the store they stacked the empty wooden crates used for shipping fruits and vegetables. The paper labels pasted on them constituted some of my first art lessons.... Every possible subject matter was exploited in dynamic full-color. Beautiful girls, famous

people, children, flora and fauna, machines, architecture, and the California vista all found their way onto citrus labels. Themes ranged from patriotism, mythology, religion, California history, to sex, and occasionally to racism."<sup>2</sup>

Sakoguchi's updated and recontextualized labels are thus the ideal vehicle to deliver his comments on the same themes originally utilized as advertising tools. In size, format, and imagery, these 10 x 11 inch paintings reference the information windows that define the late 20th Century experience of the world: magazine and newspaper advertisements, billboards and signs, television and other electronic media. The orange crate also alludes to the historical circumstances of many West Coast Asian-Americans, specifically their rural experience as day farm laborers. For the past twenty-five years Sakoguchi has maintained an archive of magazine and newspaper clippings, and more recently he has added video "bytes" to this collection. Sakoguchi confines his source material to the popular and commercial because he is interested in re-presenting and thereby subverting the images that are the iconography of our society.

Sakoguchi comments on racism in America, for example, by inserting into his painting for *Down Home* brand oranges the image from a widely reproduced photograph of a lynched black man swinging limply from a tree as a group of white men, women, and even children look on smiling, dressed for a summer picnic. This work goes beyond detailing the brutal history of lynchings in America to question how much race relations have truly changed in this country. The very existence of this image





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also provokes a number of disturbing issues, among them who took this photograph and if, as was almost certainly the case, the photographer was a participant in a grisly crime, whether the major magazines and newspapers that printed this photo were collaborators in both the evil depicted and the dissemination of the message to African-Americans of the danger of not "staying in their place."

Sakoguchi has employed this same image in another painting, *World Upside Down*, in which the composition of the lynched man and crowd remains unchanged but the race of the participants is switched. Sakoguchi asks us to imagine what the consequences of such a scene would be and points out the viciousness and hypocrisy of a country that proclaims all men to be created equal and then allows lynchings, racial violence, and two standards of justice.

One of Sakoguchi's most trenchant critiques is of the commercialism and pretensions inherent in the art world. In *Bank on Frank* brand, the outer half of the painting is composed of wide bands of saturated color, reminiscent of Frank Stella's work from the late sixties and seventies. Inside this frame, Sakoguchi reproduces a finished Stella painting that at first appears to be hanging within the ubiquitous "white cube." As one looks closer, however, the white wall on which the painting hangs is seen to be part of a bank with tellers counting money and back office workers striking deals, pointing to the merger of the modernist avant-garde and corporate values. *Super Artist* brand shows Jasper Johns looking pensively out from the cover of *Newsweek* in a loose and painterly composition that even features a paint

can full of brushes. Scrawled in the margins of the canvas are fragments of text — imagined quotes by and about Johns — such as, "Thanks MoMA and Dada," and "Po' boy makes good in the art world." These works not only demonstrate Sakoguchi's skill at satire and social commentary but also display his virtuosity as a painter. His range extends from his most frequently employed illustrative style influenced by Mel Ramos Pop to Color-Field painting and even occasionally Photo-Realism. Sakoguchi counters the postmodernist critics' proclamation of "the death of painting" by using a work's formal qualities to reveal its own historical specificity and underlying intent in a manner that no photo-based process could duplicate.

While the individual Orange Crate Labels are complete and fully-realized paintings, they are always exhibited in groups, usually of between 30 and 50. Seen in this way the crate paintings duplicate the spectacular world of late capitalism — the information and media barrage to which we are constantly subjected. It is estimated that the average person is confronted with more than 1500 advertisements daily,<sup>3</sup> far more than can be sensibly comprehended. The cluster of labels



create their own spectacular logic, in which an ad for *Three Mile Island* brand with a mother carrying her radiation burned child away from the nuclear silos in the background proclaims that the oranges are "glowing with goodness," merges into *Japtown USA* brand, a housing development of concentration camp barracks surrounded by a barbed-wire crossed Liberty Bell in Manzanar, California, which fuses with *Wiz Duke* brand featuring a white-robed David Duke and his Klan-garbed wife holding perfectly round oranges with the slogan "fresh faces, old hates." Each of the labels subverts, defamiliarizes, and recontextualizes the quotidian messages that we commonly assume to be innocuous, and as a group the Orange Crates represent the American landscape as a place of racial hatred, class division, disinformation, reassuring platitudes, environmental disaster...

The Bomb series is comprised of paired paintings of nuclear explosions — six horizontal pairs and four verticals — and smaller horizontal paintings of nuclear weapons themselves. In contrast to the Orange Crate Labels, which developed over a number of years, the entire Bomb series was completed in four months in 1983. Arranged as a group, the upper row documents the nuclear tests of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Six of the paintings depict the various stages of the underwater test at the Bikini islands in July 1946, code-named "Baker." The precise delineation of the process and the bland, purely technical titles that serve as descriptive text — *Spray Dome*, *Base Surge*, *Cloud-Chamber Effect*, *Plume Formation*, *Mushroom Cloud*, *Radioactive Rainfall* — suggest the value-free analy-

1932-1990

ROY HALSTON FROWICK



Remember Me: AIDS ( installation view), 1992

sis of scientific documentary. This effect is continued in the middle row by paintings of weapons, in which the sleek bombs on their conveyors are identified by name (MK I, MK 7, SRAM, etc.), nuclear fuel (Uranium 235, Plutonium 239), and explosive tonnage (100 kilotons, 20 megatons). The matter-of-factness of the top two rows increases the horror of the two pairs of paintings at the bottom center. These portray the two nuclear explosions that were not part of any test, the detonation of "Little Boy" at Hiroshima and "Fat Man" at Nagasaki. Next to the serene mushroom clouds in these paintings are the explosions' effects, portraits of two Japanese with their backs to the viewer who are identified only by the deadly injuries they suffered: "Keloid Tumors, Hiroshima, August 6, 1945," "Flash Burns, Nagasaki, August 8, 1945." Sakoguchi's decision to use the illustrative style and the cold clinical language of science, the military, and medicine only increases the chilling nature of these paintings.

The Bomb series began as an experiment for the artist in the technique of airbrushing. Using an airbrush removes any visible sign of the artist's hand, achieving an extremely even, satin finish. Airbrushing is the easiest way to remove imperfections in a picture and is a favorite tool for achieving the surface gloss and simulated perfection of advertising. The explosion paintings are beautiful in the same colorful, flawless manner found in commercial representation. Formally they are reminiscent of many Pop paintings of the 1960s, which also frequently employed the airbrush technique in cool, slick compositions. However, while Pop used the products of

American consumer culture as its subject matter — soup cans, cars, soft drinks — Sakoguchi's explosions refer to another particularly American phenomenon, the use of weapons of mass destruction. In contrast to Pop, the paintings of the weapons themselves reference another art historical source, Minimalist sculpture. The line of shiny metal streamlined bombs in which form is perfectly matched to function could easily be a two-dimensional representation of a work by Donald Judd or Carl Andre. Sakoguchi's critique of the inherent militarism at the core of Minimalism predates the wide acceptance of this analysis in critical circles. It is Sakoguchi's biting insight that the logic of advertising and Pop, technology and Minimalism is the same logic that produces nuclear barbarism.

Extending from the Bomb series depiction of the use of nuclear weapons on Japan, which is not only a seminal event in American history but a defining moment for many Asian-Americans, is the 1981 painting *Bananas*. *Bananas*, as Margo Machida has pointed out,<sup>4</sup> contains a double entendre referring to both Asian-American slang for Asians who seek to become wholly assimilated and the Hollywood practice of having Cau-



casian actors portray "Oriental" characters. Each of the seven panels of *B-a-n-a-n-a-s* is a scene from an American movie depicting a stereotyped Asian: Mr. Moto, Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan. This work documents a particularly bizarre and pernicious form of racism in which the dominant culture actually takes on the guise of the Other in order to construct a racist archetype. In the process, a strange creature is born, a dehumanized caricature whose distanced relationship with the viewer is incapable of provoking normal reactions or feelings. However, Sakoguchi makes apparent the naturalizing element in this dehumanization by signing the name of the white actor in exaggerated "oriental" script below the stereotyped character. In this act of uncovering, using his own process of naming, Sakoguchi subverts the mechanism of stereotyping.

Sakoguchi's current installation, still a work in progress, looks at another group that has been subjected to "othering" in American society, people who have died with AIDS. *Remember Me: AIDS* consists of 18 free-standing panels, each side devoted to a different person who has died with the disease. Each of the larger-than-life size panels (80 x 24 inches) is based on a media image of the individual, reproduced in acrylic and mixed media on a hollow-core door. The panels are placed on green artificial turf strewn with mementos, photographs, newspaper and magazine clippings, articles of clothing, etc. All thirty-six people depicted received a measure of celebrity either before (Keith Haring, Michael Bennet, Halston, Alvin Ailey) or after (Kimberly Bergalis, Ryan White, Belinda Mason) being diagnosed with AIDS.

In this installation, Sakoguchi examines a mainstream view of the disease, as might be found in *People* magazine. The fact that in the popular press Magic Johnson has become the accepted (or acceptable) face of African-Americans with HIV would almost be surreal if it were not so tragic, obscuring that the majority of African-American people with AIDS are women and children, the poor and the disenfranchised. *Remember Me: AIDS* literally represents this artificiality by constructing a simulated graveyard in which the faces of the dead peer out from giant tombstones, suspended forever as if in the midst of a segment of *Entertainment Tonight*. The tombstones sit on astroturf which, instead of flowers, is littered with objects that construct uncanny, plasticized replicas of

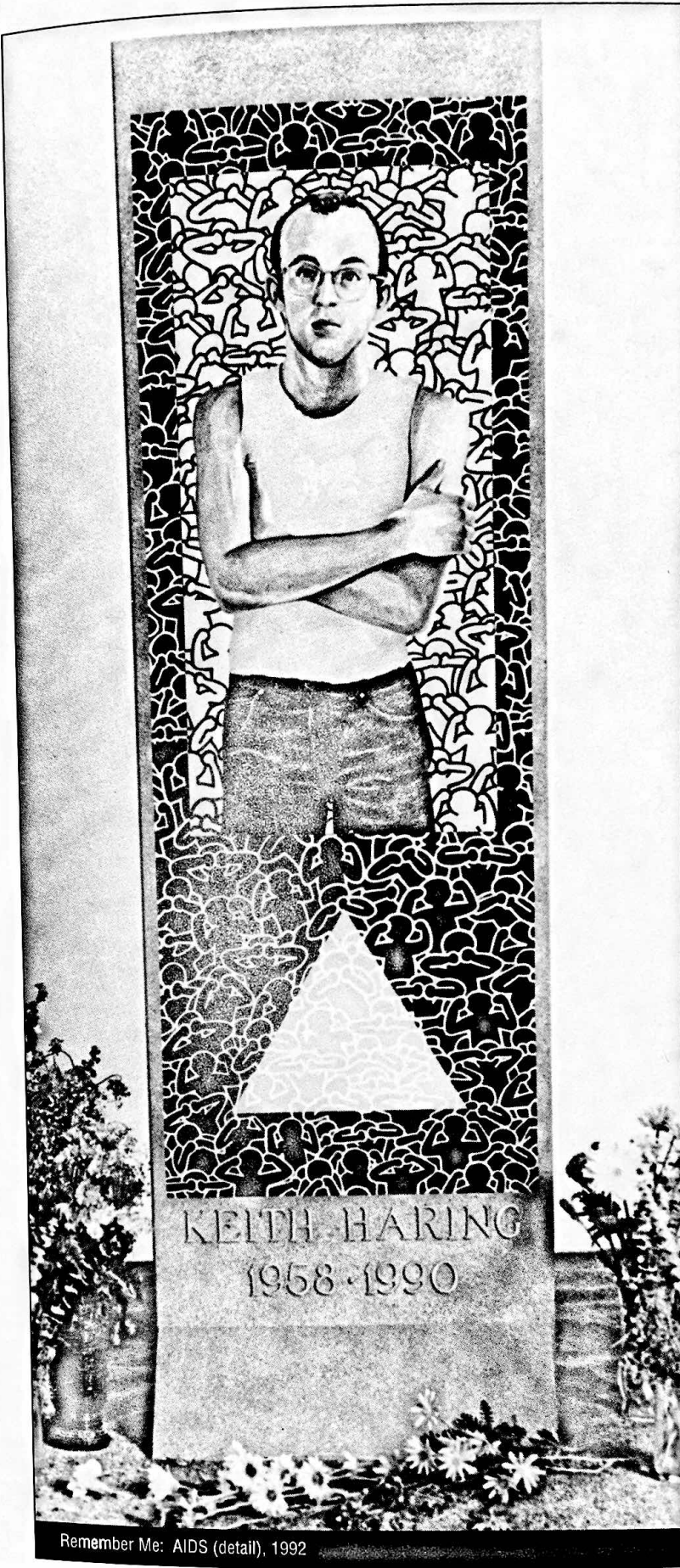
these individuals' lives — Keith Haring incarnated as an Absolut Vodka ad and a t-shirt, Michael Bennet by tap shoes, "Chorus Line" tickets, and a record album. The mechanism of archetype formation is similar to the one found in *Bananas* except that instead of human stand-ins, fetishized objects are used to

construct a fictive, mock persona. These simulations enact the "othering" process, the pigeonholing of people with AIDS into pre-existent categories which forecloses any meaningful encounter with these individuals and disallows any significant analysis of AIDS in our society. Sakoguchi has presented people who have died with AIDS in this manner to force the viewer to recognize a certain mainstream stereotype and by denaturalizing this fabricated identity to provoke possible alternative readings. But Sakoguchi's installation extends beyond the specifics of AIDS to a basic question of whether the process of representation has become so reified that it is undecipherable, suggesting that we must produce our own counter-hegemonic narratives to take control of this process. ■



#### NOTES

1. Faith Flam, "Introduction," *Ben Sakoguchi: Twenty Year Survey 1964-1984* (Santa Monica, California: Roberts Arts Gallery, 1985), np.
2. Quoted from an unpublished sabbatical report by Sakoguchi in 1976.
3. "Advertising Age," *The New York Times*, October 16, 1990, p. D6.
4. Margo Machida, "Seeing Yellow: Asians and the American Mirror," *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), p. 118.



Remember Me: AIDS (detail), 1992



## **BEN SAKOGUCHI**

Born, 1938 in San Bernardino, California.  
Lives and works in Pasadena, California.\

MFA, University of California at Los Angeles,  
CA, 1964

BA, University of California at Los Angeles,  
CA, 1960

### **One Person Exhibitions**

#### **1988**

Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles, CA

#### **1985**

Roberts Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

#### **1984**

Gorman Museum, University of California at  
Davis, CA

#### **1983**

Mira Costa College, Oceanside, CA

#### **1981**

Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles, CA

#### **1980**

San Francisco Fine Arts Museum, Downtown  
Center, San Francisco, CA  
Aarnun Gallery, Pasadena, CA

### **Group Exhibitions**

#### **1990**

The Decade Show, The New Museum of  
Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in  
Harlem and the Museum of Contemporary  
Hispanic Art, New York, NY

#### **1989**

A Different War: Vietnam in Art, Whatcom  
Museum of History and Art, Bellingham,  
Washington

Prisoners of Image, Ethnic and Gender  
Stereotypes, Alternative Museum, New York,  
NY

#### **1986**

5 At The Towers, Watts Towers Art Center,  
Los Angeles, CA

#### **1985**

Ceeje Revisited, Los Angeles Municipal  
Gallery, Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles CA

#### **1984**

Palm Tree Show, Arco Center for the Visual  
Arts, Los Angeles, CA

Crimes and Punishment, Triton Museum,  
Santa Clara, CA

#### **1983**

The War Show, New York State University at

Stony Brook, New York

Third World Artists in California, University of  
California at Santa Cruz, CA

#### **1982**

Visual Politics, Alternative Museum, New  
York, NY

Atomic Salon, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New  
York, NY

#### **1981**

Humor In Art, Los Angeles Institute of Con-  
temporary Art, Los Angeles, CA

Crimes of Compassion, Chrysler Museum,  
Norfolk, VA

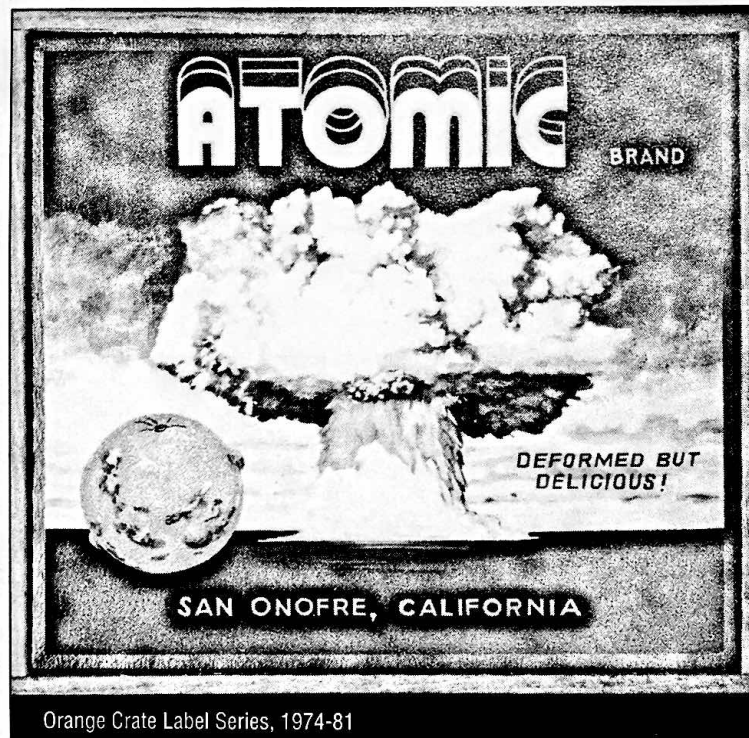
#### **1980**

8 Asian-American Artists, Roberts Gallery,  
Santa Monica, CA

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sage," Philip Brockman, Forty Years of  
California Assemblage, Wight Art Gallery,  
University of California at Los Angeles,  
1989 pp. 81,84

"Art Against War," D.J.R. Bruckner, Seymour  
Chawst, Steven Heller, Abbeville Press,  
New York, 1984 p. 124



Orange Crate Label Series, 1974-81