

Basic Detail Report



[Untitled]

Date

1942-1945

Primary Maker

Okubo, Benji

Medium

oil, canvas

Description

While it is not obvious whether the artist painted this during or post World War II, it is apparent that it depicts a Japanese-American concentration camp. The tilted plateau mesa of Heart Mountain (where the artist and his family were imprisoned) figures predominantly in the background. The fact that sun (or moon) is obscured by dark clouds is symbolic of both the psychological darkness experienced by the artist at being locked away because of his race, and the darkness of the times, in which paranoia and xenophobia dominated the American psyche. The male figure is holding what appears to be an eyeball, which may be symbolic of the government's desire to keep the Japanese Americans "in the

dark" about the social injustice of their imprisonment. The building structure, representing the barracks at Heart Mountain, is reminiscent of a maze or labyrinth, emphasizing the sense of entrapment. Two figures are the focal point of the painting: the naked man and the blackbird. Stripped of his clothes, his self respect, and his dignity, the man unashamedly weeps. The blackbird is an ambiguous symbol. In the Japanese tradition, the bird represents a messenger of the gods. In the Western tradition, notably in Edgar Allen Poe's The Raven, the blackbird is a symbol of foreboding and ominous tidings. The sense of doom is reinforced by the ghostly skull. Overall, the painting is emotionally powerful. Through symbolic imagery, the artist strongly depicts a shameful chapter in American history.;Stretched and framed .;Image of a nude man sitting upon an open-roofed structure, bent over in grief, next to a black bird. The structure is cement colored and blackish, with walls and doors giving it a maze-like appearance. In the background, a purple mountain looms above the horizon and the sun (or full moon) is obscured by dark clouds. The painting is rendered in earth tones--muted hues of gray, putty, taupe and maize. The sky is a shade of pale sea green. The figure of the man is softly modeled and his proportions are exaggerated to emphasize his muscles and broad shoulders. He is centrally placed in the foreground, and his bulk dominates the bottom the canvas. The shape of the blackbird is simplified and solid. The form of the building structure, painted diagonally lends a quality of dynamism into the scene. Barely perceptible by the wall of the building and painted the same shade of earth as the ground is a shadowy ghostlike face or the suggestion of a skull. The eerie light (whether it's from the sun or moon) provides an atmosphere of mysteriousness and foreboding. The painting is styled in a surreal manner, creating an alternate world with highly symbolic imagery and meaning. The frame is painted khaki.

Dimensions

H: 13 in, W: 10 in, Frame: 17 x 15.5 in