

On the Occasion of a New York Blizzard

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Just in time to witness the aftermath of the eastern seaboard's recent blizzard, artists and art historians from around the globe began arriving in New York City the week of February 17 for this year's College Art Association conference. Most touched down in the first planes given clearance to land at the city's airports, after days of canceled flights and airport closures, and were greeted by the feet-high piles of snow that lined every plowed street and sidewalk of the region. Ordinarily, this would constitute the perfect nesting weather for the academic pilgrim — custom-made for holing up in the conference hotel and milling from meeting room to meeting room to attend the dozens of panels, presentations, and lectures meant to showcase the newest work and research of CAA's members. Unfortunately, the unspoken allure of attending the New York City meeting, where the annual conference routinely occurs every third year, is the pleasure with which participants play hooky from the conference itself to instead take in the newest offerings of the city's galleries and museums. With a spectacular spring schedule — even by New York standards — having just begun, many attendees braved the snow piles, the rainstorms, and the foot-deep sludge brought about with the combination of the two, to at least catch some of the highlights.

As is typical for CAA's New York meetings, the program was packed and of particularly good quality. The conference opened on February 19 with a keynote address by the University of Kansas' Roger Shimomura, whose provocative lecture represented a departure from the traditional state-of-my-career piece that seems to be a staple of the professional convocation. Granted, Shimomura's long and influential career as a painter, performance artist, and professor would have merited such treatment. However, to his credit, Shimomura chose to take on a much larger and tougher topic in his address by instead directing his attentions to a recent *New York Times* "Arts" piece heralding the irrelevance of "victim art." A Japanese-American artist whose work has consistently addressed issues of racism in the United States, Shimomura is an ideal figure to challenge this notion. Respectfully refusing to generalize on the enormous and complicated subject of "victimization" itself, his presentation deftly mixed autobiography, politics, and art criticism, and was illuminated by racist imagery taken not from his own politically-charged oeuvre, or even the contemporary art world, but from American popular culture. Shimomura ran through a visual checklist of still-acceptable racist language and imagery in our everyday lives — singling out how stereotypes, caricatures, and pastiches of wildly diverse Asian cultures hide in plain sight, in imagery ranging from salt-and-pepper shakers to Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirts. Proposing his experience as but one in the spectrum of our increasingly plural (and, after September 11, polarized) country, the artist argued that so long as inequalities not only exist

between races, classes, and sexes, but are so ubiquitous as to be *internalized* by the very individuals oppressed by these inequalities, it is irresponsible to reduce artistic explorations of such phenomena to a tiresome trend on its way out. Shimomura's diplomatic illumination of the ease with which reality can be dismissed as fashion in the art world was given a standing ovation from the normally staid CAA audience. (A fact that subtly spoke to the pertinence of voices outside of the frequently insular and privileged New York scene — in Shimomura's case, bravely taking that scene to task on its own turf.)