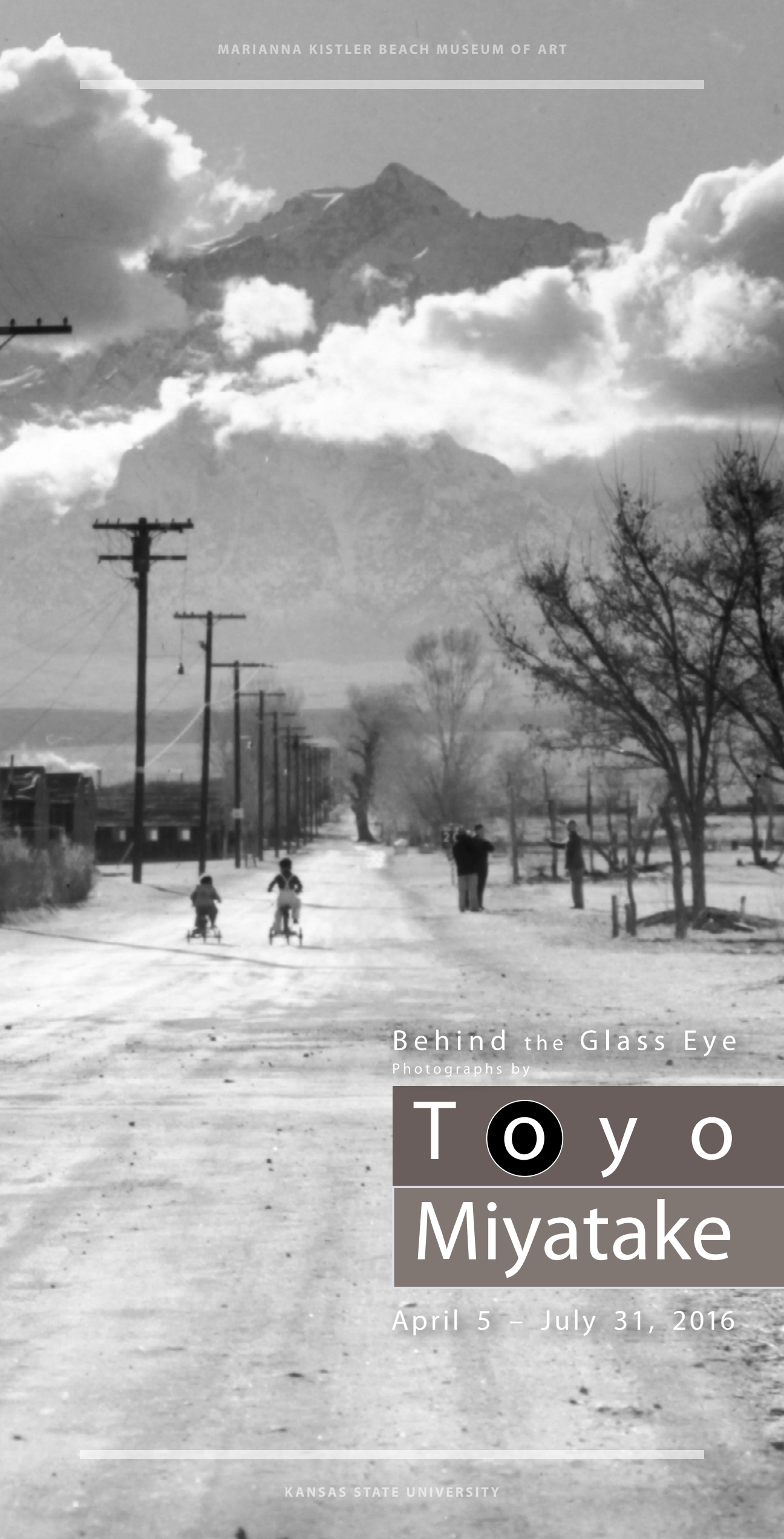
MARIANNA KISTLER BEACH MUSEUM OF ART



Behind the Glass Eye

Photographs by

Toyo Miyatake

April 5 – July 31, 2016

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

By Aileen June Wang, Associate Curator,
Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art

This exhibition brings to the Beach Museum of Art 30 photographs created by Toyo Miyatake (1895-1979), printed from negatives in the archives of the Miyatake Studio. The first section showcases Miyatake's early career as a member of an avant-garde artist collective promoting modern art. The second section features the work Miyatake did while incarcerated in a Japanese American concentration camp during World War II. All the images were selected by guest curators Hirokazu Kosaka, artistic director of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Los Angeles, and the artist's grandson Alan Miyatake.

Toyo Miyatake took up photography soon after moving to the United States from Japan and established a successful photography studio in the Little Tokyo neighborhood of Los Angeles. In the 1920s and 1930s, Miyatake was involved with a collective of avant-garde painters, photographers, and poets promoting modern art. He developed a friendship with photographer Edward Weston and choreographer Michio Ito, who collaborated with Miyatake on a series of photographs on dance. Both Weston and Ito inspired Miyatake's interest in movement and the creation of form through contrasting light and shadow. Miyatake also earned a reputation for portraiture, creating studio portraits of famous Japanese and American personalities, including Michio Ito, artist Yumeji Takeshita, and Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann. He was also active as a photojournalist, covering the 1932 Olympics for the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun. "Behind the Glass Eye" includes works from this early period, demonstrating Miyatake's response to cutting-edge concepts in photography, put forth by contemporary American artists such as Man Ray.

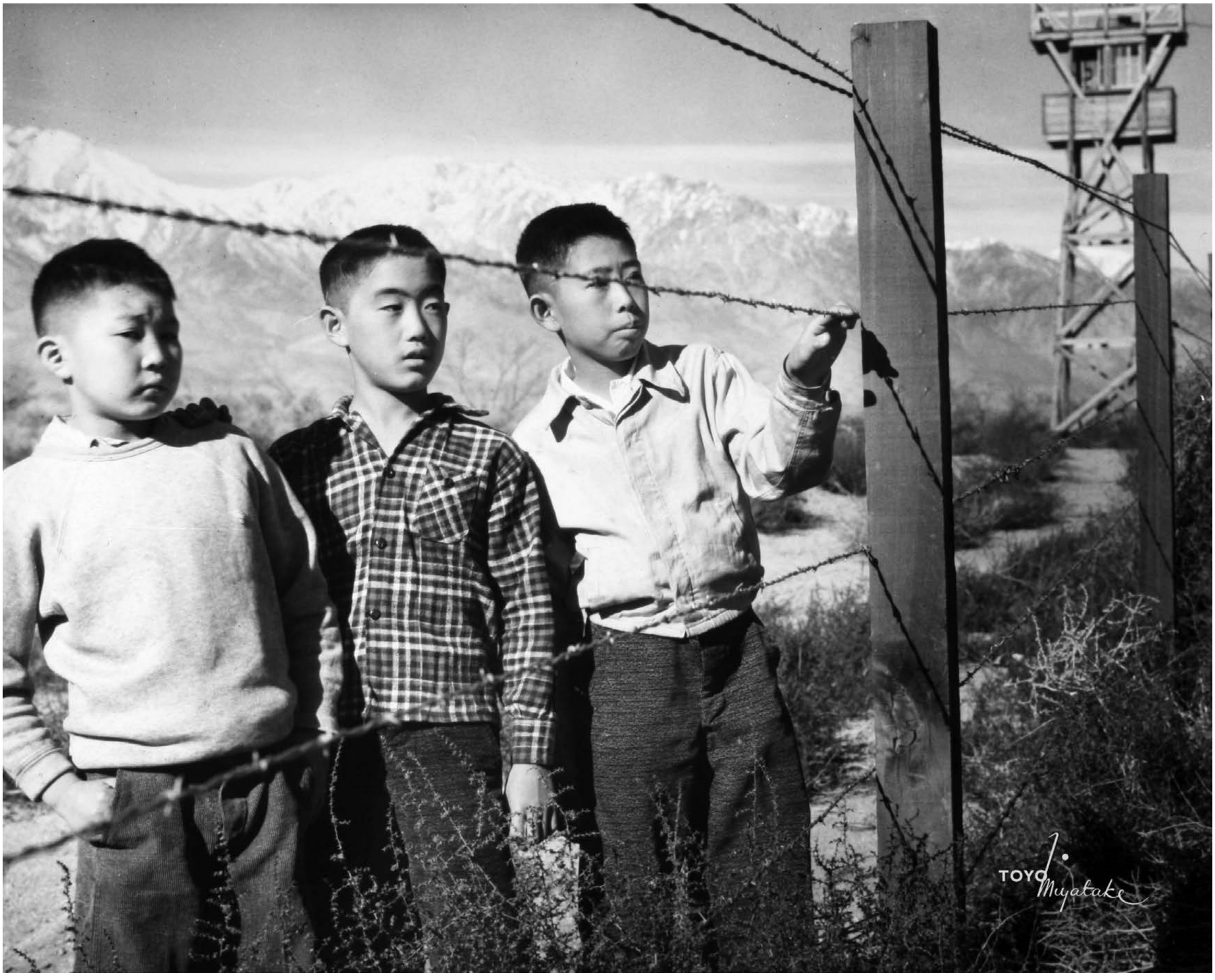
Miyatake's artistic endeavors were interrupted by the advent of World War II. Two months after the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese war planes in December 1941, the U.S. government ordered the imprisonment of Japanese American citizens and noncitizens living on the West Coast. Miyatake was forced to close his photography studio and move with his family to the Manzanar camp, in Owens Valley, California. The government classified the camera as contraband in the same category as bombs and firearms, and forbade Japanese Americans from bringing cameras into the camps. Miyatake defied the ban and smuggled a film holder and a lens, keeping his family in the dark about his plan. According to Miyatake's son, the artist stated that the risk of being accused as a spy was worthwhile because it was his duty as a photographer to record life in the camp for the future. With the help of a carpenter, Miyatake constructed a camera body from scraps of wood found in the camp.

Through Miyatake's advocacy, a photography studio was established in Manzanar one year after his arrival. It served the community by documenting birthdays, graduations, weddings, funerals, and other aspects of camp life. Miyatake and his staff, for example, were responsible for creating most of the photography in the high school yearbook. The second half of the exhibition includes work from this time. During the initial establishment of the studio, the Japanese staff operated under racially biased limitations. They were allowed to perform all studio-related work except for the actual taking of the picture, which had to be executed by "appointed personnel," meaning white appointees of the administration. Furthermore, appointed personnel removed the lens from the camera at the end of the workday and kept it until the next studio appointment. The rules were eventually loosened by an unspoken agreement between Miyatake and the director of Manzanar, Ralph Merritt, allowing the artist to photograph without supervision and restrictions on his subject matter. Miyatake credited this clearance to the influence of Edward Weston, who was Merritt's old friend.

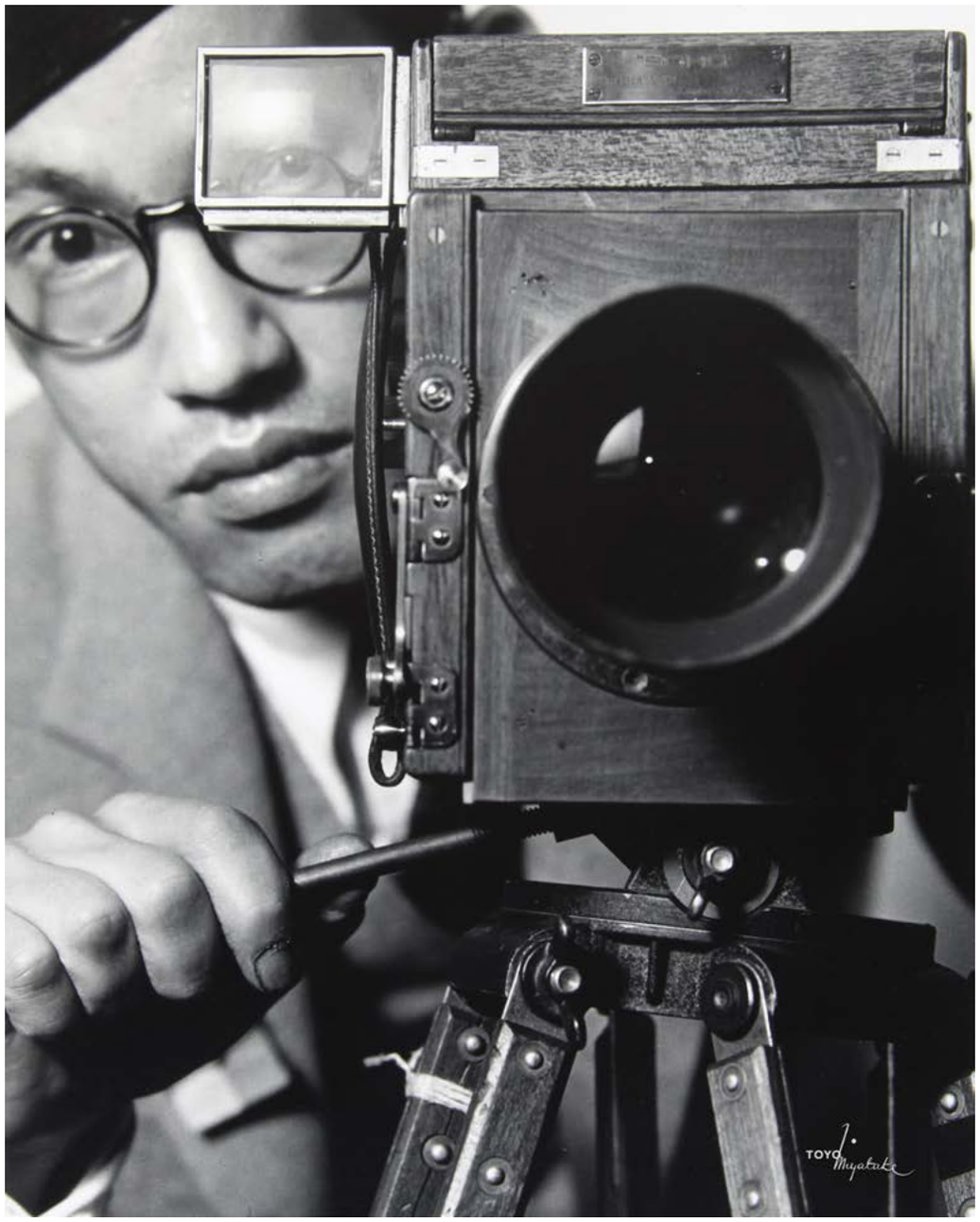
After being released, Miyatake returned to Los Angeles and reestablished his photography studio, focusing on commercial photography. His son attested to Miyatake's professional devotion, noting that his father continued to go to work every morning until two weeks before he died in 1979.

Miyatake is remembered fondly in Little Tokyo as the photographic chronicler of over 50 years of Japanese American life, unrivaled in his contribution to its documentation.

Cover image: *Block #20 Fire Break Road, children on tricyles,* ca. 1942 (printed 2016), silver halide on paper, 11 x 14 in., courtesy of Toyo Miyatake Studio, 0013



The Boys Behind Barbed-wire, 1940s, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in., courtesy of Toyo Miyatake Studio



Self-portrait with Soho Camera, 1934 (printed 2016), silver halide on paper , 14 x 11 in., courtesy of Toyo Miyatake Studio, M-194

Barbra Perry, ca. 1930, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in., courtesy of Toyo Miyatake Studio, MI 14 334

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Planning for "Behind the Glass Eye: Photographs by Toyo Miyatake" and the concurrent exhibition "Minidoka on My Mind: Paintings and Prints by Roger Shimomura" has collided in a thought-provoking way with current national and international events. Refugees are pouring into Europe from the war-torn Middle East and from desperate economic situations in parts of Africa. In the U.S. many are concerned about illegal border crossings from Central and South America. In some cases, fear, suspicion and even hatred creeps into discussion of these complex situations. The result can be that entire groups of people get stereotyped in negative ways.

Sometimes people imagine that an ideal society, a utopia, would be free of the challenges that diversity entails. History offers evidence to the contrary. In his 1990 book *Rethinking the Museum,* Stephen Weil included a chapter called "Art, Law, and Utopia." He described the utopian effort to banish "every trace of roughness, contingency, and conflict." However, he wrote, "every conflict is not, as the utopian visionaries once projected, a sign of systemic dysfunction. On the contrary, we know that in a free society such conflicts may be nothing more than the inevitable consequence of the legitimately differing interests which constitute the very fabric of such a society. …. And we know … that given a choice between an on-going process of conflict resolution and a situation in which every clash of interests has finally and permanently been resolved, the latter can only be embraced at great peril. The utopian vision, no matter how alluring, is ultimately the vision of a society in which roughness, contingency, and conflict have been and must repeatedly again be repressed – and such a society is not by our standards a decent society."

Art can play a crucial role in helping all of us think about human nature and the kind of society we want to live in. Finding meaning in an art experience takes us into new and interesting territory. Differing interpretations are the norm; discussing these with others almost always leads to further discovery – related to the art, but also to understanding our fellow humans and ourselves. Art can teach people not simply to tolerate difference, but to value and protect its expression. I hope the artworks in these exhibitions serve as catalysts for probing discussions.

Linda Duke
Director, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art

Guest Curators: Hirokazu Kosaka and Alan Miyatake
Coordnating Curator: Aileen June Wang
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