

Ontario Museum of History & Art
Equal Justice Under Law: Leah Knecht
February 25 - April 4, 2021

Artist Statement

History, transformation, and throwaway culture are themes that I have gravitated toward, and lately social and political injustice have become a major theme. History illuminated current events, increasing my focus in social justice through my art.

Growing up having Japanese ancestry made me a target, and since I knew little about WWII and the internment of Japanese Americans, it was a confusing time. Martin Luther King, Jr's quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," has always been a comfort and guiding light, as we can only overcome injustice by coming together.

Recent political events, especially the Trump Administration's separation of families at our southern border, triggered much anger and horror at the parallels of internment, so again art became an outlet. This time I delved into my family's own history. Even though my maternal grandparents escaped being interned by moving to Illinois, they lost their home and photography studio. Reading my grandfather Ikuo's desperate letters seeking employment there, plus letters from the War Department, made me realize Executive Order 9066 affected many more than the people actually interned. My grandfather eventually secured a job as a Japanese translator at the University of Chicago, but his Japanese language and writing skills were rusty, being that he immigrated here at fourteen. I found his practice calligraphy of the Japanese alphabet, and incorporated those in *Ikuo's Journey (2021)*, along with a scroll that was in their house, and copies of those letters.

Through making this art, I had a visceral realization that trauma can be passed down for generations. *American Dream (2010)* has projections of my ancestors from the transparencies of them to the wall behind the piece, echoing this theme. Generational trauma and lasting damage surely exist for descendants of slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, and other injustices people have experienced and are experiencing.

My artwork, *Equal Justice (2018)*, speaks to judicial and racial inequities, including the mass incarceration of People of Color, from the ephemera used in the resin equal sign that dissects the piece, to the painted façade of the Supreme Court where the words "Equal Justice Under Law" are engraved. Equal Justice Under Law might be an ironic title, but it is also an ideal we can and should strive for.

- Leah Knecht