

Banta Cliffs

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Gama Caves

I was first introduced to the cliffs and caves of Okinawa on the floor. In 2010 Osamu James Nakagawa brought prints of Banta Cliffs and Gama Caves to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. As he unrolled what appeared to me to be massive textured abstractions he started to tell the story of the cliffs, his experiences photographing and the palpable weight of the island's history. It was jarring to look down on these prints, knowing that among other things, this was the site where a large number of Okinawans committed suicide amidst the Battle of Okinawa in World War II. Nakagawa's images deliberately tilt his viewer's perspective, instilling each image a radical composition combined with a lush detail that cause the viewer to second guess their position in relation to the rock. In one image the viewer is gazing down a precipice, a slice of roaring sea just visible. Another pulls the viewer face to face with the sharp crags and pocks of the rock, as if standing above the ocean floor. In his newer series *Gama Caves*, Nakagawa draws his viewers into the earth, illuminating dark caverns that are both sacred sites for the island's shamans and sites of violence and death during the WWII.

Visitors to Poissant Gallery during Fotofest 2012 had the opportunity to encounter Nakagawa's photographic renderings of both *Banta Cliffs* and *Gama Caves* along with a video installation. Through this exhibition, Nakagawa delivered an experiential excavation of the Okinawa and its history. This interview addresses the work made in the caves.

Gama 009, from the series *Gama Caves*.
2010, Pigment inkjet print
40 x 60 inches
Courtesy of sepia EYE, NYC;
Photo Gallery International, Tokyo;
Pictura Gallery, Bloomington, IN



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Natalie Zelt: Was there a clean transition between *Banta Cliffs* and *Gama Caves* or was there a period where you were thinking about caves and cliffs at the same time?

Osamu James Nakagawa: Um, I think there was a small overlap. When I was making *Banta Cliffs* the *New York Times* published an article about how the Japanese government, in editing new textbooks, was cutting out the fact that the Japanese military forced thousands of innocent Okinawans to commit suicide in these caves at the end of the war. And all of a sudden I realized, "I must do this." What happened in these caves was important. So I wrote up the proposal to Indiana University and applied for Guggenheim Fellowship to do *Gama Caves* and luckily, I received both of them to explore my project. I was scared shitless to go into those caves for the first time because so many people died there in gruesome ways. And then all the books I read about the caves – it's a mad house. Plus technically I needed to figure out how I was going to photograph in the dark. I needed the highest resolution medium format digital camera with long exposure capabilities. I researched and got the most powerful car headlight flashlight I could find so I could create an image with the greatest depth of field possible inside the cave.

NZ: How did you get in the caves then?

OJN: I went to Okinawa during Christmas break just to see if all this was possible or not. My wife's family (she's from Okinawa) told me not to go into the caves. Historically the caves are considered sacred places, but their more recent history is very loaded and dark for Okinawans. My wife's cousin eventually arranged for me to meet this high-ranking shaman, Ms. Miyagi. Okinawan shamans like Ms. Miyagi have long used the caves for sacred rituals.

NZ: What did she do?

OJN: She took one look at me and said, "You're not from Okinawa!" and then followed up with, "...but you're not from Japan either." I was shocked because I was speaking fluent Japanese. "No, no my wife is from Okinawa." I explained. My cousin added, "He lives in US, he's a photographer." She asked, "When were you born?" I said "1962," and she responded, "the Year of Tiger. Tiger people are destined to release spirits. You know why you're coming to Okinawa? Those spirits are calling you."

NZ: Well that's another reason to be frightened to go into those caves.

OJN: She asked if I planned to exhibit my photographs and I said yes – in the US and Paris and she said "See, that's why they are calling you. They want you to release their spirit outward." She said I was

protected and then she gave me the history of the caves prior to WWII. They've existed for thousands of years as very sacred places. She led me to 20 different sacred caves. Yes, in WWII people fled to the caves to seek shelter from the bombing and the caves were used as field hospitals, but before that they functioned as graves as well as ritual sites. This older history is yet another reason why I think Okinawans don't want to go in there.

NZ: So are the cave images similar to cliffs in terms of process? With many images stitched together digitally?

OJN: This one is different, it is more like being in a darkroom making prints, burning and dodging or painting with light. In the total darkness of the cave I opened the shutter and walked around with the flashlight, exploring and illuminating the space a little bit at a time. I am not interested in simply documenting the cave – I don't consider them documentary photographs – once I had the images captured I altered the color to make it more real, the way I remembered the colors from the darkness of the caves. All the *Gama Caves* images are layers of single exposures drawn out with Photoshop, only four of the larger images are stitched.

NZ: So it is more of an experiential project, more than documentary?

OJN: Yes, it's about experiencing and contemplating in the caves, in their darkness and the fullness of their history.

NZ: But not just your viewer, the process of you, going in there, in that space.

OJN: Yes. Sometimes I spent 8 hours at a stretch in the caves shooting. It was completely dark and I was constantly straining to see something, anything, really. This act of searching for something that you cannot see became a metaphor for the entire project that played out in the capturing of the images in the caves, in their rendering and in the viewer's experience of them.

NZ: And then you transitioned to the video?

OJN: Yes, it's from last summer. I went back to the caves just to shoot video. Using a fisheye lens I shot a good amount of footage. I think that video gets at the metaphor of experience more directly – you feel the process, the journey of me going through the caves with flash light in my hand. Like my use of painting in the still images to recreate my memory of the experience of being in the caves, *Gama* video is a collaboration with videographer Arthur Liou layering lots of different footage together and masking it with texture to evoke the visceral qualities of the caves. We collaborated on the sound with composer Melody Eötvös.



opposite, left: *Saipan 002*
from the series *Banta Cliffs*.
2008, Pigment inkjet print, 20 x 60 inches
Courtesy of sepia EYE, NYC; Photo Gallery International, Tokyo;
Pictura Gallery, Bloomington, IN

opposite, right: *Okinawa 017*
from the series *Banta Cliffs*.
2008, Pigment inkjet print, 20 x 60 inches
Courtesy of sepia EYE, NYC; Photo Gallery International, Tokyo;
Pictura Gallery, Bloomington, IN



NZ: It is so abstracted, it transforms.

OJN: Yes - like the core of the earth turning and churning. Faces appear and disappear. But at the same time reality is there in things like the bats you see flying by.

NZ: I didn't even think of that, of you being in those caves with something else alive.

OJN: Oh yes, the photos probably have thousands of bats in them, flying, but you just can't see them, in the video you can.

NZ: So what's next?

OJN: It's still sketching stage at this point. I started experimenting with frottage, using ink to do a rubbing of the cave wall, just to try and it didn't really work so I tried on a WWII memorial that listed the names of schools, the number of deaths and so on. I started doing these rubbings on Okinawan paper and then I began to single out the words and fragmentize the sentences, so certain words and names are floating on the paper - a deconstructing both of history and memorialization.

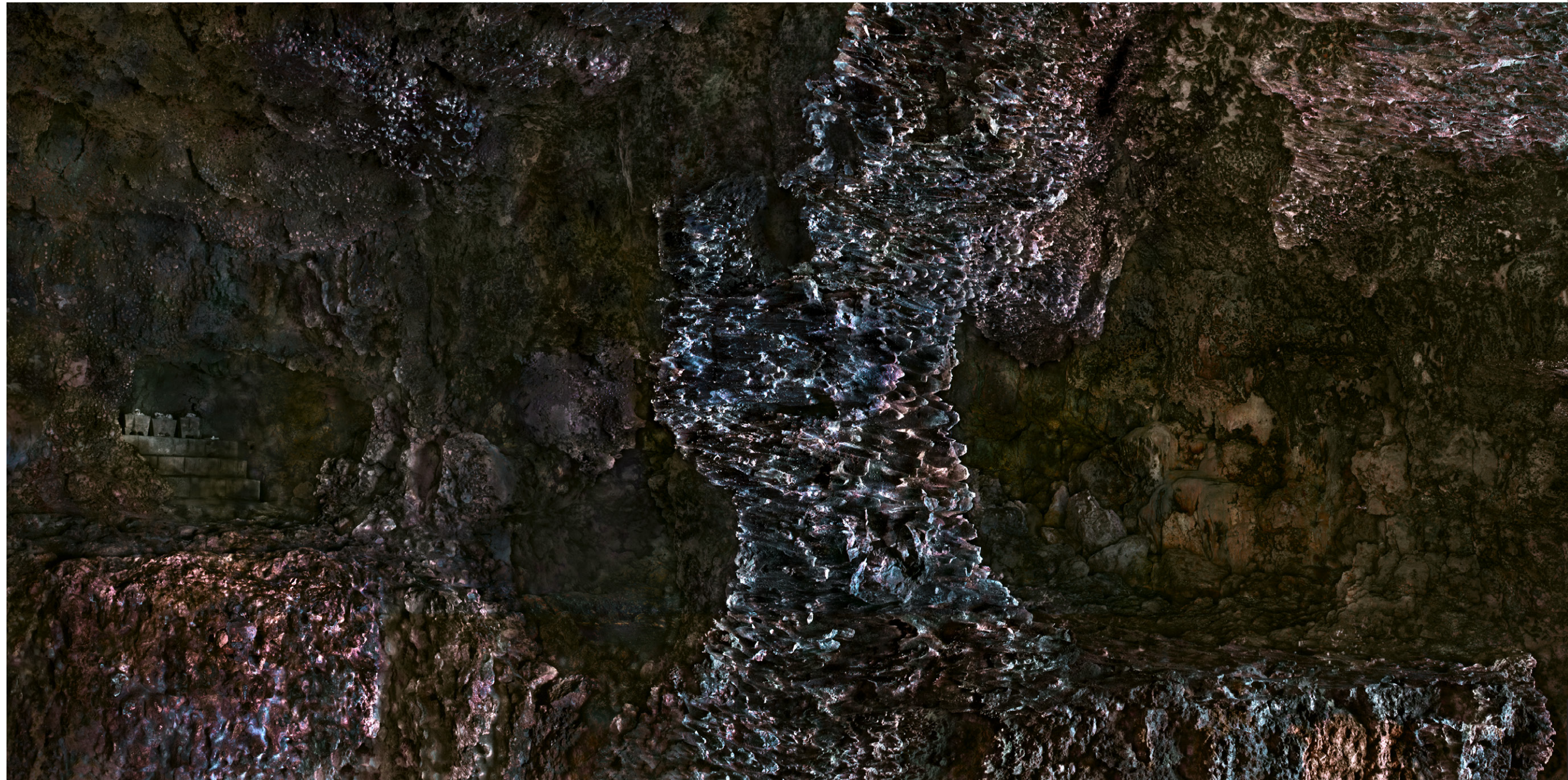
NZ: Or what is represented?

OJN: Yes, so I started doing rubbings in other places to see. Then I was thinking about how I can I transform this image to photographic material such as cyanotype with reference to Okinawan blue sky and ocean...at this point this is still experimentation stage but...

NZ: That would be a pretty nice way for all these projects to round out. If the initial catalyst for all these projects was the official way that history has been recorded, to actually use memorials or markers or records of history to make work.

OJN: Yes, I'd like to deconstruct the political agenda imbedded in the war memorials' text by combining that text with Okinawa's sun and color. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the US returning Okinawa to Japan. It is a strange coincidence that my daughter was born on the anniversary of this event, May 15. Many exhibitions are organized for this occasion in Okinawa and I am glad I can talk about the issues of Okinawa here, in Houston and at the Les Rencontres d'Arles in France in July with my upcoming exhibition. This is my way of paying respect to Okinawans and the conflict associated with the 40th anniversary.

NZ: Releasing those spirits. 



above: *Gama 021*, from the series *Gama Caves*.
2011, Pigment inkjet print
40 x 80 inches
Courtesy of sepia EYE, NYC; Photo Gallery International, Tokyo;
Pictura Gallery, Bloomington, IN

left: *Gama 001*, from the series *Gama Caves*.
2010, Pigment inkjet print
40 x 60 inches
Courtesy of sepia EYE, NYC; Photo Gallery International, Tokyo;
Pictura Gallery, Bloomington, IN

Osamu James Nakagawa was born in New York City, raised in Tokyo, Japan and returned to Houston, Texas at the age of 15. He received a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of Houston. His photographs are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among others. In 2009, Nakagawa received a Guggenheim Fellowship to support his project in Okinawa and in 2010 the Higashikawa Photo Festa's New Photographer of the Year Award in Japan. Recently he was nominated and mounted a solo exhibition for the 2012 Les Rencontres d'Arles Discovery Award in France. Nakagawa lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he is an associate professor of photography at the Henry Radford Hope School of Art at Indiana University.

Natalie Zelt was the curatorial assistant for photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from 2009 to 2012. While there she co-curated and co-authored *WAR/PHOTOGRAPHY: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath* with Anne Wilkes Tucker and Will Michels and curated collections exhibitions including *Public Dress*. She is a co-founder of Gift of Gift of, a non-profit art collective that supports emerging photographers. She served on HCP's education subcommittee from 2010-2012 and will curate 2013 exhibition on photography and contemporary food culture. Zelt has been accepted into the Ph.D. program in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and will begin in the fall 2012.