At the Limits of Visibility: 
Noritaka Minami’s *Past Won’t Pass* (Catalog #52)

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In a confluence of iridescent amber, ochre, and glowing yellow text, Noritaka Minami’s work, chosen as the image representing this volume of *Octopus Journal*, prompts a meditation at the limits of visibility. *Past Won’t Pass* (Catalog #52) (Fig. 1) is but a small part of a larger series of images by Minami that engage with the photographic documentation of propagandistic Japanese war documentary paintings (*sensō sakusen kirokuga* or *sensōga*) produced during World War II. 153 of these paintings were confiscated and documented following the Japanese surrender, and they remained in U.S. custody until their return to the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT) in 1970 under the condition of “indefinite loan.” Archival photographs of these paintings taken at the time of confiscation currently reside in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Despite the return of the physical paintings, MOMAT’s subsequent hesitancy to discuss war paintings and implicate individual artists in the war effort has led scholars and others to speculate on the incomplete inclusion of war painting into the Japanese art historical canon. Rather than viewing the war years as a strange gap in the history of famous artists like oil painter Fujita Tsuguji (1886-1968), art historian Bert

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Winther-Tamaki argues, “the war and its cultural climate may be understood as having caused not a diminution of the scope of Japanese painting, but rather as having incited new ambitions for it to serve as a vehicle for collective Japanese identity.” Although not focusing on the prospect of a collective Japanese identity, Minami’s work approaches war painting obliquely by utilizing the archival photographs of these paintings in order to recognize the transnational afterlife these images acquired after the war. These images create spaces where we can question materiality, memory, and the role of the archive at the limits of the visible.

The identity of the inverted image that hovers below the surface in *Past Won’t Pass (Catalog #52)* is "Banda Unit Fighting Fiercely Off Philippines" (Bandatai firippintō oki ni funsensu), created by Japanese oil painter Miyamoto Saburo in 1945. Citing artist Yamada Shinichi, art historian Mayu Tsuruya explains the *Banda Unit* and many other early sensōga works appealed to the U.S. Occupation officers on the basis of their bright colors and airy compositions. Despite its optimistic aesthetic appraisal by U.S. officers, war painting was perceived as the most appropriate medium to document and bolster support for the protracted war and it was this purpose that led to the confiscation of such paintings by the Occupation forces. Miyamoto is best known for his 1942 painting *The Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival* (Yamashita Pāsibaru ryōshireikan kaiken zu), and, as described by Tsuruya, “No war painting

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3 Winther-Tamaki, 145.

4 Tsuruya, 137.
better expressed the supremacy of Japan in this new global order... The meaning of this painting was self-evident to viewers: Japan had rightly prevailed." Works like those of Miyamoto call into question the complicated reception of war painting as both dangerous war propaganda and as a crucial continuation of established practices in Western painting. War paintings thus had—and in many ways still have—an uncertain status at the margins of Japanese art history.

Despite temptation to reduce this work to its painted referent, Minami's work is not a mere reiteration of this complicated politico-historical dilemma or the disputed status of Japanese war painting. What is made apparent through Minami's technique is not the presence of the painting, but the real existence of the documentary photographs housed in the National Archives. Minami's work circumvents the limitations of the physical paintings to explore alternate points of access to these works. The collection of photographs at the National Archives is one of the few places where these paintings can still be viewed as a group. Aside from the “invisible” history of war painting in which these works necessarily engage, Minami's light boxes also revive and reactivate these images to raise questions regarding contemporary access to these war paintings in both Japan and the United States.

Using a photonegative scanning method, Minami allows light to permeate both sides of each archival photograph and simultaneously presents the photograph and its corresponding archival text printed on the back. In privileging the legibility of the text, Past Won’t Pass presents these images both upside-down and inverted, which creates a hovering ghost image that only becomes visible through careful visual reconnaissance and a sense of delayed awareness. Minami subverts common assumptions about the immediacy of visual images by supplanting that access with words initially meant only as peripheral, archival identifiers. By emphasizing the textual component, Past Won’t Pass does not merely archive the archive, but makes visible the complicity between the U.S. and Japan in a single image by literally fusing Japanese war painting and the archival information recorded by the U.S. Army’s Signal Corps. The work questions the U.S. involvement in the postwar legacy of these images and asks us to consider the role of these photographs located in an American archive now that their physical counterparts have been returned to Japan.

Although the text is oriented right side up in order to facilitate reading, the chance composition does not always permit a clear contrast. In illuminating both sides of the document, the end result is sometimes legible as seen in this example, while, at other times, text descends into incomprehensibility as the glowing words merge with the light areas of the photonegative. In another image from the series, Past Won’t Pass (Catalog #44) (Fig. 2), white text is hardly visible against the diaphanous violet and indigo of the ghost image blown out by the intense light of the scanner. Both images feature the spectral hovering of an aircraft in the bottom left that fades in and out of recognition alongside the archival text. The visage of a Japanese warplane and the “supremacy of Japan in this new global order” explained by Tsuruya is

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5 Ibid., 171.
6 According to their mission statement, the United States Army Signal Corps is tasked with providing and managing communications and information systems support for the command and control of combined arms forces. One of their fields of responsibility is “Visual Information” and from 1942 until 1970, the Army Pictorial Service (APS)—a branch of the U.S. Signal Corps—was responsible for producing motion pictures for the training, indoctrination, and entertainment of American forces. For more information, see the US Army Center of Military History, [http://www.history.army.mil](http://www.history.army.mil).
overlaid with the history of confiscation by the U.S. Army.\textsuperscript{7} This violence in history is complicated by the violence of formal disappearance.

Despite the concentrated efforts of scholars to make the history of Japanese war painting known, Minami raises an entirely separate line of questions regarding the materiality of the archival photograph. The questions provoked by \textit{Past Won’t Pass} primarily concern limits: the limits of visibility, the limits of historical memory, and the limits of legibility. The project contrasts the open access to these photographs in the U.S. with their censorship in Japan. It also highlights the invisibility of this particular archive against more popular, well-cared for collections and enriches the history of war painting through an examination of its archival life offshore and beyond the surface of oil on canvas. \textit{Past Won’t Pass} implores us to reevaluate the limits of photography’s indexicality as it pertains to documentation and objectivism at the same time it conjures spectral images of a “past” that simply will not “pass” into history.

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\textsuperscript{7} Tsuruya, 171.