

Impact Statement

Antwion Leflore, Grade 10.

The Photographers Table: The Restoration of Devastation, 2018.

Mixed media, photography on paper, 30 x 40 x 5 Inches.

Forest Hill High School, Jackson, MS

Unsung Hero: Yōsuke Yamahata

What do you think about when someone tells you they work as a photographer? Ask a photographer and you hear responses like “Oh that sounds like fun” or “I love taking pictures”. The normal response does not include “How Heroic”. But for every photograph of smiling people and beautiful landscapes, there has to be someone out there willing to record the devastation and tragedies of the world. Not only does this put the photographer in personal physical danger, but it takes a strong person to be able to witness desolation and pain.

On August 9th, 1945, at 11:02 a.m. an atomic bomb was dropped over the ship building city of Nagasaki. This attack hit the north of the city killing over 35,000 people. The very next day, a young photographer who worked for the Japanese News and Information Bureau was given one of the toughest photographic assignments in history: to document Nagasaki the day after the atomic bomb had been dropped. That young photographer was Yōsuke Yamahata.

Yamahata spent a period of 12 hours looking at the face of death. Charred bodies, destroyed building, and the destruction of thousands of his fellow countrymen way of life surrounded him. In his 100 exposures, Yamahata was able to complete the only comprehensive photographic record of the immediate aftermath of an atomic bomb. The strength it took to complete this assignment is what I found to be inspirational about Yōsuke Yamahata and makes him an Unsung Hero.

While doing research on Yamahata, I learned that a lot of his photos were restricted until almost 10 years after the initial bombings. After his death, Yamahata’s work was rediscovered. After restoration work was completed on his original negatives, an exhibition of his prints traveled the world. It was during this time that the New York Times referred to his images as “some of the most powerful images ever made.”

For my interpretation of Yōsuke Yamahata, I decided I wanted to focus on the restoration of his film. I envisioned a photographer working on restoring Yamahata’s negatives and printing out the images that he originally printed back in 1945. Using old film, news articles from World War II, a plaster wrap of my hand, drawings of Yamahata’s photography, and pieces of old cameras, I created an image of the workspace as the photographer stretches out the film in his hand. After drawing out some of the more powerful photos of Yamahata and creating a portrait of him, I arranged then with the news articles. These were aged using watercolor. I feel that if I was restoring these negatives, I would want to know what was going on at that time. Because of this, I chose to include newspaper articles from both atomic bombing and other events that happened during the fight in the Pacific during World War II. I feel this not only gives a view of the Nagasaki bombing, but a snapshot of the entire career of Yōsuke Yamahata as a military photographer.

In order to share my project, I was given the opportunity by my teacher to present my artwork and tell the story of Yōsuke Yamahata to each of the U.S. and World History classes. I was then able to discuss the strength it takes to be in the middle of one of the world's most devastating bombs. I have also been invited to display my artwork and paper in the district art show and in the local chapter of the Art Educators Association seasonal newsletter, which will be coming out in April 2018. Completing this project has not only increased my knowledge of the events in 1945 but has strengthen my desire to be an artist one day. It is my hope that I will be able to use my art in an inspirational way.