

## “Empowering Gestures of Quiet Resistance”

Artscape: DNP Communications  
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### By Meruro Washida

Born in 1973. Curator. Former curator at the Kanazawa 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art (1999-2018). Curator of the Japanese pavilion at the 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale international exhibition (2017). Curator of the Aichi Triennale 2019.

*Identity XV* exhibition has opened at [nca | nichido contemporary art](#) in Hatchobori, Tokyo. Since 2003 nca has been holding the annual “Identity” series of exhibitions featuring artists selected by visiting curators organized by the Contemporary Art department of the well-established Galerie Nichido. Up until now, the “Identity” exhibitions have been subtitled. Examples include “Memorandum on the Sublime” (Taro Amano, 2016), “Horizon Effect” (Mizuki Endo, 2018), etc. However, I thought to engage with the series’ theme “Identity” itself this time, so I did not add a subtitle. In addition, though the number of artists has ranged from five to nine people in most of the exhibitions up to now, I decided to narrow it down to three artists this time to clearly show their respective expressions.

James Jack is exhibiting two botanical drawings with a South Pacific motif. Words are pencilled in the white spaces of the drawings; in one of the works a species is indicated to be “unidentified.” The plant is, in other words, indeterminable based on the botanical drawings of Okayama-born botanist Ryōzō Kanehira★2

Jack was born in the United States of America, but has lived for many years in Tokyo and currently produces art in Singapore. Two years before moving to Singapore, Jack was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Kyushu University. During that time, he encountered the archival materials in the collection at the same university where Kanehira had been a professor at Kyushu Imperial University. Kanehira had studied Southeast Asian flora following Japan’s expansion into Southeast Asia before World War II. Though he is known for his studies of Taiwanese flora, he also conducted surveys of islands including Java, and acted as Head of the Herbarium at Bogor Botanical Gardens★3, created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century following Dutch colonial activity. Virtually all the flora in the Bogor Botanical Gardens have their species identified and are captioned. However, there are some species of flora that cannot be categorized. Though the names of those species which could be identified had been written down, there were also some among them whose names had not been indicated. What had caught Jack’s attention was how Kanehira had not recorded the names of the flora. In other words, one could say that they had slipped through the categorizing gaze of colonialist museology that had come along with colonial expansion. Jack’s attitude of empathy towards things that have eluded categorization stems from the questioning of his own his identity as someone who creates art while migrating. Jack juxtaposes the ambiguity of identity against the colonialist powers of categorization, stated more specifically held in practices such as naming.

Though these three artists’ works differ in their methods of expression, all of them share the attitude of giving weight to the small discomforts born from the act of identifying others in a globalized information society. In Japanese, identity has been translated as ‘coherence of self.’ In other words, it refers to how one names oneself. However, one’s coherence of their

own identity is often related to how one is defined by others, and authority is born in this action. These three artists resist this authority in quiet yet persistent ways.

★2—Ryōzō Kanehira (1882-1948) was a forestry scientist who was engaged with the recording, categorization and research on the lumber of productive trees. He spent time in Kyushu Imperial University as a professor and assumed the post of head (1942-1945) of the Herbarium at Plantentuin te Buitenzorg (now Bogor Botanical Gardens) {*original name was Dutch*}. The botanical specimens he gathered in the tropics, centered around the Asia Pacific region, are now managed as the Kanehira Collection at the Kyushu University Museum. <http://www.museum.kyushu-u.ac.jp/specimen/index.html>

★3—The largest botanical park in Southeast Asia boasting the largest collection of cultivated species in Asia located in Bogor City Indonesia. Known as “Kebun Raya” in Bahasa Indonesia. <http://www.krbogor.lipi.go.id>

*Identity XV*—curated by Meruro Washida. Duration: 23 May 2019 (Thurs) – 29 June (Sun) Venue: nca | nichido contemporary art Tokyo-to Chuo-ku Hatchobori 4-3-3 B1

James Jack. *Botanical Lesson in Idleness #4*. 2019.

James Jack. *Botanical Lesson in Idleness #7*. 2018. Photographs by author.

Translated by Nathasha Lee