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## David Tanimura Interview

Ryan Richter

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**Interviewer: Ryan Richter**

**Artist: David Tanimura**

**In-Person Interview: David's home in Chicago**

**Date: May 15<sup>th</sup> 2012**



Self-portrait courtesy of the artist, 2012.

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design*

**Artist Bio:** From Chicago Illinois, David Tanimura has created a truly unique style all his own. What began as just fun on his fathers computer at a young age has turned into a passion for art and so much more. It's not just collage, it's Digital Collage.

*~Ryan Richter*

To learn more about David, visit: <http://www.musashimixinq.com/>

**Ryan Richter:** Well David First I would like to say thank you for allowing me to interview you, I really appreciate it.

**David Tanimura:** Oh thank you, it's an honor. Don't worry [laughs]

**RR:** For starters I would like to start off slow, I did a little research and I came across your website, and I'm hoping I'm saying it right, it's Musashimixinq.com

**DT:** You got it

**RR:** To be honest, there is a lot of stuff on there. You have quite a good chunk of work on your site, but before I get ahead, tell me a little about yourself.

**DT:** Let's see, I am Yonsei Japanese American on my father's side. I am Bohemian Jewish on my mom's side. I was born here in Chicago in 1983, and in the last few years I have been able to get my art together and really get it out there.

**RR:** Oh wow that's very exciting. To start, I noticed some of the pieces you had on your website, and how would you categorize them, the name "Musashi Mix", and the term "Digital Collage"? How did you come up with the labels?

**DT:** I'll start with the name of the website, "Musashi Mix" comes from my middle name, it's "Musashi". So, David Musashi Tanimura, my parents sort of put a lot of thought into it. David for, King David, and my great grandfather's name on my mom's side, from her family tradition. And then from my father's side, outside of the last name, he really liked the story of Musashi. Miyamoto Musashi was an artist and a warrior, and a poet, just like King David. They thought it would be perfect. "Musashi Mix" was something I actually came up with my junior year in college, I was working on film projects and other things, and I just thought of it. It carried over from college, and I thought it could be a space I could have for my artwork. I didn't know where I was going to go with my artwork, but I wanted to have a place for it. And that's how it came around.

**RR:** And that's been up since 2003 then?

**DT:** No it's from 2010. I started building it in 2009, the names (Musashi Mix) really from 2005. It's been building sort of since from 2005, and 2008. But it really exploded later, but slowly.

**RR:** Wow, all that from your middle name.

**DT:** Yeah, I read Musashi's "Go Rin No Sho" the book of Five Rings was like a bedtime story for me.

**RR:** I'll have to write that down [laughs]

**DT:** "Go Rin No Sho" is a breakdown of fighting strategy. He was one of the best swordsmen in history. As an old man he wrote and retired from dueling. He wrote this

long treatise on tactics and strategy. It's still used today as a business strategy and philosophy. And I've had that as long as I can recall.

**RR:** I'd love to see that applied in a business mentality

**DT:** It's good for psychology, and it's just good for how people work. It was written in 1600 and it still holds true.

**RR:** I guess he really knew what he was doing then.

**DT:** Well he won something like 60 duels and retired then

**RR:** Oh, I won't question his legitimacy then [laughs]

**DT:** Yeah [laughs]

**RR:** So, as your website grew, and your own medium, "Digital Collage", was this evolutionary process. Was it an evolutionary process, did you do this, then that, or did you start with drawing, then painting, or was it all organic?

**DT:** Digital Collage was something I had to come up with because it's a medium that doesn't really, people don't really understand what I'm talking about it when I mention it. I've had to coin it [laughs].

**RR:** I'll admit, I had to think about it.

**DT:** Right, the idea of collage is the idea of layering images and ideas on top of one another, but in a new context. And because, regular collage, decoupage, montage, all that sort of thing, you are limited by the materials you are given. If you have a picture, that's the picture. You have a finite amount of resources. For Digital Collage, the fact that I grew up using Photoshop and working with my dad, it really opened up a lot. With Graphic Design, and the idea of layering ideas was kind of natural. When working on something, the task of context is what's at hand a lot. You have to layer things, and put them into context, when they aren't. That person wasn't there, that shadow wasn't there, you have to trick people sort of into thinking they are. My first experiments were in using this tool to create surreal things with various media. Family photos, various scraps of art, free use images I found on Wiki commons, where all copyrights have been voided. Those things are part of the open public.

**RR:** It's a free for all of sorts?

**DT:** It is a free for all, yeah. With that, I'm free to mix whatever images together and do what I want, and at the scale and size that I want. That's really where Digital Collage came from. I did do a lot of sketching and drawing as a kid, but I was using Photoshop at the same time. I would do my line drawings and scan them in the black and white, and fill them in. That was in grade school, I've always been tooling with Photoshop.

**RR:** Wow, you're really ahead of the curve on using Photoshop. While yes Photoshop has been around, by and large it really took off amongst younger users over the past five to seven years. Let alone being a child using it.

**DT:** Yeah I know, but growing up with my dad the graphic designer, he let me use the same tools as him. I found out a lot of things by just using it. We've had every edition of it since I've been nine years old. I'm so used to it, I wrote all my papers on it growing up. Page Maker was used over Word. It's what I was used to.

**RR:** Who knew there were old school Photoshop guys? [laughs]

**DT:** [laughs] Well there's filters, there's all of these tools. I remember when you had to cut every single corner with a mouse, and you could not let go of the button. I would take a picture with a camera, and scan it in. It wasn't necessarily a color scanner, but the pieces didn't really come together until recent. Now everything's digital, Photoshop doesn't take as much work. If I wanted to take a physical print before, I would need all of these tools, but nowadays, not so anymore.

**RR:** That's unbelievable how that tool has evolved into what it is, almost a night and day sort of situation with usability?

**DT:** Well, not quite. I like how quick things can be done, but at the time, when it came out, it was cool and high tech. I began as a student of photography. I began shooting on my dad's F1 Nikon when I was two. We have a dark room in our basement. I'm proud to say that when I say dodge and burn, I actually understand what that is. When I'm using Photoshop dodge and burn, I actually know it. I'm not saying that I could do what Ansel Adams did, but I know what he was using and what he had to do to get there. The vocabulary is the same as in a photo studio. Did you ever take photography in high school, or College?

**RR:** I actually just finished taking beginning photography, or old school photo. My Professor was a real purist when it came to old school photography. There was a history aspect to it even though it was primarily a studio course. I learned about Ansel Adams and what a great technician he was, it really proved that, ok this is an art form. I know that was so often an argument when photography came out, but after learning about Adams, it was like ok, not every monkey could do this. You might be able to teach a monkey in some way? [laughs]

**DT:** That's what Instagram is though! [laughs] Personally, I love Instagram, it's awesome, but everyone can kind of, they understand sort of now, because everyone has a 10-mega-pixel camera in their pocket now, there's a social aspect to it. Even if they don't understand the art or the history aspect of it, they sort of understand it more now. People are playing with photography now and that's really cool. So yeah, Digital Collage (laughs)

**RR:** [laughs] Alrighty, that's fine. On to your work, on your website, I saw you had the exhibition "Occupy: The Art of War", and it was really an astounding collection on there.

You had other pieces called “Titan”, and “To The Lost”, one of the images that stuck out to me was called “Fallout”. I really want to ask you how long a “typical” piece take, or is there one? And in reference to “Fallout”, the history, I saw you used family photos, does that happen organically, or?

**DT:** It is a pretty organic process. “Fallout” is a fun one to dig in to. Any one of these (takes out iPad with dozens of images) has two or three-dozen images in Photoshop. This one has six separate, original images cut together. So the samurai in the background was a staged photo that a photographer did. This image is actually from public domain, so it’s free. The background is from the hydrogen bomb test done in the fifties. And, fun fact, any photo taken by US government camera, is copyright free. As long as it has been declassified, it is free to anyone. The Geiger counter I put in his hand, I shot it. The gas mask I actually shot at a shop on Belmont, and the zombie hands were mine that I messed with. This is actually one of the more obvious ones, but it’s actually one of the more, less complicated as far as content. Take this one, from an actual battle photo of Okinawa. There’s an old man in a cave, and there are also soldiers from France. I put a bazooka in their hands. There is a picture that I took. There’s about a dozen elements that make up this photo.

**RR:** That statue looks menacing to be honest

**DT:** Well I sampled things from my trips there. I’ve only been twice, but I want to go back. Each piece, roughly takes about a week or so. But it’s an hour or two at a time.

**RR:** A little here and a little there? Do you feel that that’s beneficial to the process?

**DT:** Sometimes yeah. Sometimes it will be the case where I have an idea, but it might not be until the next week where I’ll be looking online or something, and the idea will fully come to me. And that’s how that process goes.

**RR:** That’s unbelievable, to be honest. Wow.

**DT:** Thank you

**RR:** Moving on, in my class we’ve learned that Asian and Asian American artists have faced a magnitude of issues in regards to their art. Oftentimes occurring when they are in an art show. An artist might be Asian American, born in the United States, but put into an Asian category, as if they weren’t born in the United States. Have you ever faced any kind of struggle or stereotype?

**DT:** It’s a problem, but it’s also a draw. It’s like you have to step up your game in a sense. I am what many might call “half and half”, people might not know but that’s what it is. When I walk into the room, people wouldn’t say, “Jewish”. I was even in an Asian American class in college, and we were talking about race and what is Asian? It was a very left school, and everyone was thinking “No race doesn’t matter, we’re color blind”. And then my professor asks everyone “Who here thinks David is Jewish?”

**RR:** Flat out in front of everybody?

**DT:** Yeah, and this is my favorite professor. He was actually my advisor. He just asked that, and everyone curled back. It's funny, but what could be a conflict, I see as a challenge. People come in and probably anticipate pretty fun nice things that aren't going to be scary. It's cute like Hello Kitty, and Godzilla. It's going to be ninjas and stuff. I've tried to be a little underhanded; subversive. If we're going to use "Fallout" it's "Fallout". My family was both in the internment camps, and killed by the Atomic Bomb. But when people come up to my artwork and are like "oh it's pretty, it's Japanese, it's cute", that's a bit of a problem. It's Japanese. It's cool. Well what does that say about my identity? I'm ok with it being cool, I'm ok with people being interested. I'm glad people came, but I'm going to confront you with it. We're going to talk about it.

**RR:** Keeping with the questions of identity, would you ever consider being involved in a Jewish themed exhibition?

**DT:** If they'd have me [laughs]. I've never been asked, but I've never been very religious with how I've been raised. We had Hanukah and Passover and all of my cousins' Bar Mitzvahs. My mom's side, all her family were in Cleveland and we saw them a few times a year. But I'm from here. This three flat that my grandparents in 1953. I grew up on the third floor. My dad grew up on the second floor. The first floor used to be my aunts and uncles. Once my grandparents got married. After the war, people could leave camp as soon as someone was sponsored. I grew up in a Japanese American community. But I'm never going to be picked off as being Jewish. I was in New York last year, and there was this Hasidic group. They had a bus called the Mitzvah tank. They were asking people on the street who looked Jewish, if they had had their Mitzvah. They asked my wife, who is Swedish and Irish [laughs] I took a picture of it. No one is ever going to pick me out, it's always sort of a fun fact.

**RR:** What new work are you working on? Any specific pieces?

**DT:** "Apocalypso Nouveau" is my current series, it's what I've been working on now. I'm 38 pieces deep right now. This is all going from World War I images, using Nouveau to sort of capture.

**RR:** Oh wow

**DT:** Here's an image from Fukushima, I did this before I knew what I was doing. This is an old Absinthe poster that every college kid has. I've always loved this poster, but I never had one. When I looked this up, I found out it was public domain. I had to think about this for a bit. Take "Bitter Oriental", it was a liqueur that was popular in the 1920's. Popular at the same time as Absinthe came on. It was orange spicy flavored liquor. It was billed as "Bitter Oriental". Always white women, and semi nude. They're just pretending, it's just orientalism. After this, I was like, this is legitimately a series

now.

**RR:** Well thank your for letting me interview you, really.

**DT:** You're welcome, it was a pleasure.

**End.**