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Roger Shimomura Interview

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Interviewer: John E. Beale II
Artist: Roger Shimomura
Phone Interview Chicago/Kansas
Date: April 25, 2013

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, and Design.

Artist Bio: (The following biography was taken from Roger Shimomura's *Press Release Biography* on his website <http://www.rshim.com/>) Roger Shimomura's paintings, prints, and theatre pieces address sociopolitical issues of ethnicity. He was born in Seattle, Washington and spent two early years of his childhood in Minidoka (Idaho), one of 10 concentration camps for Japanese Americans during WWII.



(The image above was taken from <http://www.rshim.com/contact.htm>)

Shimomura received a B.A. degree from the University of Washington, Seattle, and an M.F.A. from Syracuse University, New York. He has had over 130 solo exhibitions of paintings and prints, as well as presented his experimental theater pieces at such venues as the Franklin Furnace, New York City, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. He is the recipient of more than 30 grants, of which 4 are National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in Painting and Performance Art. Shimomura has been a visiting artist and lectured on his work at more than 200 universities, art schools, and museums

across the country. In 1999, the Seattle Urban League designated a scholarship in his name that has been awarded annually to a Seattle resident pursuing a career in art. In 2002 he received the College Art Association Distinguished Body of Work Award. The following year, he delivered the keynote address at the 91st annual meeting of CAA in New York City. In 2003 he was a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painting Award. In 2006, he was accorded the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the School of Arts & Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, and five years later was one of 50 alumni to be presented with the "150th Anniversary Timeless Award". A past winner of the Kansas Governor's Arts Award, in 2008, he was designated the first Kansas Master Artist and the same year was honored by the Asian American Arts Alliance, N.Y.C. as "Exceptional People in Fashion, Food & the Arts." In 2011 Shimomura was designated a United States Artist Fellow in Visual Arts.

Shimomura began teaching at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS in 1969. In the fall of 1990, Shimomura held an appointment as the Dayton Hudson Distinguished Visiting Professor at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota. Shimomura began teaching at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, in 1969. During his teaching career at the University of Kansas he was the first faculty member ever to be designated a University Distinguished Professor (1994), receive the Higuchi Research Prize (1998) and the Chancellor's Club Career Teaching Award (2002). In 2004 he retired from teaching and started the Shimomura Faculty Research Support Fund, an endowment to foster faculty research in the Department of Art.

Shimomura is in the permanent collections of over 85 museums nationwide. His personal papers and letters are being collected by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. He is represented by Flomenhaft Gallery, New York City, Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, 8Modern Gallery, Santa Fe, and Byron C. Cohen Gallery, Kansas City.

Note: the following interview was not recorded. Roger Shimomura's answers to my questions are based on my notes.

Interview Transcript

John Beale: Do you have a favorite superhero? I noticed in your art work that there are a number of pieces that include Superman or you portraying yourself as him.

Roger Shimomura: I do not have a favorite superhero per se, however, Superman who is internationally known as an American icon, conveniently lends himself to all those standards and values called “American”. He’s become my whipping boy of sorts.

JB: How do you identify?

RS: I identify myself as an American of Japanese descent.

JB: Can your art be categorized? If so, what category would it fall under and why? If not, why can it not be categorized?

RS: Most critics and historians categorize my work as being sociopolitical. I refer to it as art relating to issues of ethnic identity.

JB: When did you first become involved in art? Was there a specific event that sparked your interest, or made you realize this was your passion?

RS: There were two influences; the first was my three uncles who were all highly successful and well known graphic designers in Seattle. Second, I used to draw everything my family could not afford to buy me. The latter example is when art became magical to me.

JB: Tell me about “*Shimomura Crossing the Delaware.*” Where did the inspiration for this piece come from? Intent?

RS: It’s a look back on what could have been and a look forward towards what might have been. Imagine the historical circumstances that would have had to be different in order for Washington to have been Japanese American. Even more far fetched, imagine how history might have changed if Washington were Japanese American. Prior to this American history had been recorded primarily based upon the achievements of European Americans. This hypothetical situation is simple but almost impossible to comprehend.

JB: Why did you feel “cursed when your grandmother told you that anything you said or did in life, good or bad, would reflect on the entire Japanese race”¹?

RS: Those seeds that are planted at a very early age tend to galvanize as one gets older. Not only are the expectations unreasonable, it blurs the edges of reason and reality.

JB: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

RS: I tend to focus my efforts upon solo exhibitions. I have not sought a show in over 25 years now. That seems to take care of itself. Most group exhibitions that I am invited to tend to focus upon the politics of ethnicity such as the one I am currently in at the Whitney museum of American art.

JB: Which of your works is your favorite? Why?

RS: To pick a “favorite” would only reflect my preference for that moment as my opinions are in a constant state of flux. I do tend to remember the larger works that I have done as they took a more major time commitment to complete. Because of that I remember “NIKKEI STORY”, “SANSEI STORY”, “NOT PEARL HARBOR” and “SHIMOMURA CROSSING THE DELAWARE”.

JB: Are you currently working on a piece?

RS: I am currently working on a new series of work that is a parody on pop artist Tom Wesselman’s “GREAT AMERICAN NUDE”. The intent of this series will be to create and explore relationships and tensions between the European American female and the Japanese female, Japanese American female, cross cultural objects in a still life, and masterpieces of modern American art.

END

¹ Shimomura, Roger . "Roger Shimomura An American Artist." *JSTOR* 22 Apr. 2013: 76. Print.