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Jon Yamashiro Interview

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Interviewer: Ciera Stokes
Artist: Jon Yamashiro
Location: Skype
Date: February 14th, 2017



Photo courtesy of the artist.

BIO: Jon Masuo Yamashiro was born the oldest son and raised as a third-generation Okinawan American in the “cultural pastiche” of Honolulu, HI. He traveled from the islands to study at Washington University in St. Louis and received his BFA in 1985, then went on to earn an MFA in photography from Indiana University in 1991. Since the fall of 1993, he has had the privilege of teaching photography to college students at Miami University. Jon lives in Liberty, Indiana, with his wife Jennifer and their daughter Lydia and son Luke. <http://yamashiropphoto.com/>

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART200: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, and Media & Design.

Interview Transcript:

Ciera Stokes: How are you doing today?

Jon Yamashiro: I guess I’m okay. So, I don’t have any secrets! So you’re in an Asian American Art class?

CS: Yes

JY: What are you guys studying? What's the structure of the class?

CS: We basically go over a lot of Asian American art history so far. And she [Professor Laura Kina] highlights certain artists. We look at their work. Also art movements that she's been a part of herself, as well as other movements that have happened in history in relation to Asian Americans and their dislocation and identity in America. So, it's an interesting class.

JY: Yeah? It's good? [laughs]. Sounds good.

CS: Yeah, so if you don't mind I'll just ask a few questions. Could you just tell me a little bit about yourself? Just some background, where you grew up...anything.

JY: Well I grew up in Hawai'i, I think Laura's from Hawai'i too. My background is actually not that exciting. I grew up kind of in a normal environment and home in Hawai'i. Have you ever been to Hawai'i?

CS: No I haven't, but it's on my bucket list.

JY: So Hawai'i's a little bit different in terms of its racial make-up and race relations that we talk about today. It's a little bit of a different place, you know? Race and ethnic background is something that is usually talked openly about and one of the first things used to describe a person. Growing up in a racially diverse environment is normal. Racism still exists, but it's out there and people are knowledgeable about other cultures. I went to a private high school too, so to kind of give you an idea, Barak Obama went to Punahou which was our rival high school. I went to 'Iolani, which is another private high school. And he [Barak Obama] graduated a few years before I did, so that's sort of the generation that I was a part of. And, it was pretty fun growing up. There wasn't anything abnormally challenging in terms of racism, that I found. After high school, I went to college at Washington University in St. Louis and got a BFA in Studio Art with a concentration in photography. Then I actually went back to Hawai'i to teach high school for a couple of years. Three years later, I came back to the mainland and went to Indiana University for my master's degree. So, I have an MFA in photography. Then after that I taught for a year in Athens, Ohio at Ohio University. Then, I got the job that I have now at Miami University. And I've been at Miami for...gosh...about 23 years. That's my short resume.

CS: Wow.

JY: So the medium I work in is basically photography. I'm actually in my darkroom right now at home. That's what I love to do. I also, of course, went to art school at Washington University so I draw and paint, but work primarily in photography.

CS: So what kind of inspired you to get into art? As well as teaching?

JY: That's a good question. When I was a kid, my parents were really supportive in terms of what I wanted to do and I remember being pretty good at art, like ceramics and drawing. And, I could do that kind of stuff in elementary school. In middle school I started to really get into ceramics and I went to some classes at the Art Academy in Hawai'i. I took some drawing

classes. So, when I got into ‘Iolani in 9th grade, I knew that I really liked doing art. And ‘Iolani is a private college-prep school and they have a really good art program that I was fortunate to be a part of. I did everything there: ceramics, drawing, painting, metals, and I started photography there a little bit but didn’t think that I would major in it.

Then I went to Washington University in St. Louis because I could get a BFA at a great university. I could concentrate in art. At that time, tuition wasn’t like it is now and I got a little scholarship, so it made sense. It was a great experience. St. Louis is an amazing place and that was the first time I was on the mainland for a long time, and there’s a lot that goes into that. But, anyway, when I was there I took a photography class with a new professor, he was brand new. Stan Strembicki was super enthusiastic and I got hooked. So that’s when I starting doing photography seriously, when I was a sophomore in college. That’s how I got into photography. I never saw myself as a photographer really, but I guess that’s what I call myself...I guess [laughs]. What was the other part of that question?

CS: What got you into teaching? Specifically, at Miami University.

JY: That’s interesting. So I graduated from college, then I went back home to Hawai‘i. The summer before, between my junior and senior year of college, I taught summer school at ‘Iolani School. I wasn’t even out of college yet and I taught a summer class, which was kind of a fun thing. But, when I got back to Hawai‘i after I graduated the person that taught photography left to go back to school. So there was an opening. The head of the art department at ‘Iolani asked me if I would be willing to do it. And that was so lucky, you know? My mom’s a math teacher, so I knew a little bit about teaching and what it was about. But, I never saw myself as a teacher. I taught for three years at ‘Iolani. And its hard work. You should go back and thank your high school teachers because they work really hard. But, I taught high school for three years and decided to go to graduate school so I could actually teach in college. I thought it would be a pretty good gig because in art, at the university level, you can teach it, but part of what you do is you have to still make art. So for me, in my mind at that time, teaching at the university level was the ideal thing. My dream job, I guess. And I’m lucky enough to be doing that.

CS: That’s awesome. How would you define or categorize your art? Or even yourself as an artist?

JY: [laughs] Define myself? That’s kind of a crazy thing. It’s funny because when you say “photographer”, I think people have specific ideas about what that is. I see myself more as an artist that uses photography as a medium to communicate. I think art is that...just another language. A visual language. Photography, for me, is a really interesting way to do that. Because it doesn’t seem so abstract, you understand, anybody can look at a photograph and think they understand the subject matter. We grew up with that kind of imagery. Because of that, I think it’s really powerful. So, to define my art...I mean...it’s that. I see myself as a teacher, a communicator, and hopefully I have meaningful things to say. I don’t see myself as being very political. I grew up making creative things that was in a way selfish or internal. But, based on that I started to make work rooted in my background and my cultural upbringing. Because that’s what I knew. And, that’s what you do right? It’s tough to make meaningful work about things that you don’t understand or haven’t been a part of. So, just by doing that and being who you are

at some point you might make work that in some groups may be seen as political. So, the project that I'm working on now--and I'm trying to get a book published--I photographed at the ten World War II Japanese incarceration camps.

CS: Yeah, I saw that!

JY: Yeah, so I've been trying to get that published. For myself, I wanted to see those places, and sort of photograph the ghosts that are there. I just wanted to see those places for myself, it started out that way. But when I'm starting to get the work out, and work on this book project, I realized how politically connected it is, right? And, I'm far from an activist at all, but at some point you need to just talk about things like that. But my work, it comes from myself and what I know and how I see the world. So I would sort of define myself as an artist that does that. Not particularly political. Sorry I got off subject a little.

CS: No, you answered like three of my questions in one, so that's great. Because you talked about your Asian American identity and how it connects to your art, and I was going to ask you about the internment camps, and just how you feel connected as far as identity.

JY: Well, actually let me add to that. Growing up in Hawai'i, we didn't have direct contact [with the actual incarceration]. People from Hawai'i weren't put into big camps like they had been on the mainland. There was a small camp that they put people in that they thought were really important in the Japanese community. For the most part my parents, and Hawai'i, were under military rule, but I mean they were living their lives and weren't put into camps. It's interesting that the general in charge of the west coast was the only one to act on Executive Order 9066 - to separate people into camps. It's an interesting and frightening thing. So, growing up I really admired the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Do you know about that?

CS: No, I don't.

JY: The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was a military unit that was a segregated Japanese unit. The 442nd and the 100th Battalion fought in Europe and was made up entirely of Japanese Americans, half from the mainland, half from Hawai'i. And they had something to prove. It was interesting to know that these kids of military age couldn't fight in the normal army because they were not allowed. So they had to be in a segregated unit. So their parents were in concentration camps, and they volunteered to fight for America, which I think is an amazing thing. So just that act for me was very heroic. This group became one of the most decorated units ever to fight for the United States. And they came back to America, and Hawai'i especially, and became important people. They became Senators, they had big businesses and things like that. That generation for me was kind of inspiring. Their connection to the camps was what has always stood out for me. I heard about the camps and I knew they were around and I just wanted to see them. So that's why I was so interested to start this project.

CS: I notice that most of the pictures if not all that I've seen are in black and white. Is there a reason why you chose to portray your art in that way?

JY: I'm comfortable with that process. And, for me it's a little abstract in a sense, more about memory. Black and white photographs have a timeless quality that I wanted these images to have. For me emotionally, I was a little more comfortable communicating that way. So, with the photographs being black and white, I can sort of infuse the emotional quality into the images better than I could in color. I've seen a lot of good work in color actually of the internment camps. And, I wanted to not do that same thing either. But, I also have more control, and I love the way the black and white photographs can sort of –because of their abstractness –convey that emotional quality. So, that's the major reason. I also love black and white! I love the process, you know? So, for an artist that's all part of it. I mean the technical, craft process of it, but also how it communicates, and it communicates in a way that you can control.

CS: So you talked a little bit about your parents.

JY: Yeah

CS: Are they from Hawai'i as well?

JY: So, I'm a –on my dad's side— sansei. Laura knows about this. That means I'm third generation. My dad is Nisei, and his parents were the first generation to come to Hawai'i. On my mom's side I'm fourth generation. But let me go by my dad's side. So, my dad was sort of young for that generation. He fought in the Korean war not WWII, so, he was a little bit late. But, he was a little kid in 1941. He was playing outside at 8 or 9 years old –playing on the streets –and he actually saw and heard the planes fly over his head that were going to bomb Pearl Harbor. So, that was my most direct connection to the bombing. My mom was really young, just 4 or 5 years old. She doesn't remember a lot, but she remembers having to black out her windows and not go out after a certain time and things like that. But, being a parent is interesting. Actually, one of the reasons I started this project is because of my daughter. I'm married to a Caucasian woman from Wisconsin! So, my kids are Hapa. They're mixed race. My daughter was in elementary school and we live in a small community. Her friends were like, “well your mom's not your mom because she doesn't look like you” kind of thing. And, it hit me that my daughter had to start to deal with racial identity, with the way she looks. The sort of racially related things that you just can't hide. It's right there. Her friends talk about it like it's nothing but she had to start dealing with that. So, I wanted to –for myself too –start dealing with the subject. A lot of things seemed to come together and I started researching and photographing at the camps. My daughter's incident was one of the reasons. Our history is important even though my family wasn't a part of the camp experience, just because of the way I look and the way that my kids look that history becomes part of us. You know what I mean? You're not directly involved but that's still a part of *your* history, collective history, right? So, when you deal with life you have to sort of take that into consideration.

CS: Yeah, and I can also relate to that on a personal level. Not to get too into it but half of my family is Black and the other is Native American and I have family members that had to stay on reservations, and I really connect with your narrative with that. Because even if you're not the generation that experienced that, it's really important to know how that effects your history and just where that places you in just the diaspora of America.

JY: Because, you know, once you know that people see you in a certain way, you need to realize where that's coming from. It becomes a part of your history. And you should see it as a strength. It should be empowering and shouldn't be something you're ashamed of. I've run into some people whose grandparents were in the camps who have a little bit of a different take on that. It's painful and a little embarrassing. That's why the people that were in the camps –a lot of the people that were there –when they left it (and this is just a part of being Japanese) they hid it. Sometimes they didn't talk about that experience at all. That's why, at first, it was very difficult to find a lot of information about it. I mean it's culturally embedded to kind of say “we got past that, let's forget about it, let's sort of go on,” “*Shikata ga nai*” and move on. And so, that experience was not voiced. And I've run into people whose grandparents were in the camps but they didn't even know until they were a lot older. So, that's an interesting aspect of this story. That would probably be different with different cultures. Maybe, I don't know.

CS: Yeah, it's definitely that way with my grandparents as well. They don't like to talk about it.

JY: Yeah, almost like they're doing you a favor by not burdening you with this information.

CS: Another question that kind of relates to that is –like bringing it back to your art –besides the internment camp piece is there any other work that you've done that you feel bring up Asian American identity or themes?

JY: Before I started doing that, when I came out of graduate school, I was making still life images that were about the larger themes of life and death. Things that I saw on a larger scale, sort of, generally with no direct connection to my cultural background. About 5 or 6 years after graduate school I started using the same structure, still lifes, but I used objects that were culturally relevant to me. So, I had my grandma send me all these dolls. I started using dolls and I started finding objects that were related directly to my history. I started telling these stories through these still lifes. The work became about my past and growing up in Hawai'i. I started making images about ghosts in Hawai'i, stories that I heard about that influenced me. I started directly grabbing information from my history and then bringing that into the work. That was sort of my “cultural still life” phase.

Then that grew and changed –there were different variations of how I was approaching that subject –it kind of grew into this more documentary project of the internment camps. So, there's a line there. But, as an artist I don't work on one project at a time. I like to have two or three projects going on around the same time, so if I'm getting stuck on one I move to another one. Like right now I'm trying to finish this incarceration project and get something done with it. And then I also have these portraits of my kids and their friends that are more light hearted. They're photographs, but I paint on them. I'm actually finishing putting gold leaf on one of them now. So, I'm sort of working in that way. And sort of thinking about photographs and painting, and how they can be combined. And not directly dealing with my cultural background in a sense.

CS: Was it important to you personally to identify with your cultural background and bring that into your art or did it just kind of happen?

JY: I consciously did it. Actually, that's an interesting question. I never thought about that. At first, when I was in art school and in college I didn't want that to be the case. I didn't want to use my personal story –I thought it was too easy [and maybe boring] –I didn't want to do it. To use my personal cultural background to make this work that was different just because I was different. Like everybody else I wanted to fit in but I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be seen as an artist who was really good at my craft, and smart. So, I didn't want the cultural aspect, that personal aspect to be part of it. I was naïve at the time but I wanted to prove myself as an artist. So, the work didn't have any direct connections. But you realize as you go on, that that's who you are. How you see the world. I realized I saw the world a certain way, and it had a connection to the way I grew up. I made work that looked a certain way because of the things I was influenced by growing up. So, if you want to look at it this way – the frame that I see the world in, that I make my art in is structurally influenced by the way I grew up and what I saw. In a way that's cultural bias.

So the culture was always there for me but I didn't consciously say that I'm making this work because I'm Japanese American. It was there behind the scenes. I didn't realize that until later on. You know when you start thinking about your work more seriously. But, in a sense, it's always been there, as you grow you start to become more conscious of what you're doing. So, then it became more conscious and I started directly involving stories that I was a part of into the work. So, it was a gradual growth. But as I look back on it, it was always there. I don't know, that's tough. It's an interesting question. I don't know if I answered it well.

CS: No, it makes perfect sense. Not everyone is going to be consciously like "I'm making Asian American art to show the world." It's just like you said, it's how *you* see the world. And it is influenced by your culture.

JY: You're right. When I was in undergraduate school, there was a woman there who was a few years older than I was. She was Asian American. She grew up on the mainland, so she had a different experience, but she was making her sculptural work directly about the Asian American experience. I saw her work as a sophomore, she was a senior, and I saw her work in an exhibition and I was like "wow." I mean I relate to that, it's interesting. But in my head, I was like "I can't do that." I want to just perfect my craft and do it my way. But I saw that work and I remember that work and my reaction to it till today.

CS: So, did you have any exhibition opportunities that contextualized as Asian Americans?

JY: Some, yeah. And this work is definitely part of it. But, what that brings up is the audience. The audience for your work changes. So, I think it's funny that my work, if it's in an exhibition...it should be in more exhibitions. I'm really bad at promoting my work. But the audience then sees you as: "Asian American, you're making a statement about being Asian American." So, it's really tied to you culturally. And you feel that responsibility. Whereas before it was a little bit different. It was different. I lost my words, ask me that question again.

CS: I was just wondering if you had any exhibition opportunities, like the one you were talking about with the girl that you saw, that were contextualized as Asian American?

JY: Yeah. The short answer is I would like to be in more of those. And that I'm really bad at promoting my work. As an artist, you think you want to be famous, but that's not it. It's not the fame. For me it's more about making the work and sort of doing that. I'm never going to be famous, I'm never going to be really well known. And that's something that I've come to terms with. I really like to make the work. I need to be better at getting it out there. Hopefully this book will help a little.

CS: I think I just have one last question for you. Besides the internment camps –I know you're working one that –but what else are you working on currently?

JY: Yeah, so I talked a little bit about the portrait project that I had, which is painted work too so I'm thinking about the abstractness of mark making –of painting. People see photographs as sort of a truth you know? So, imagination and truth come together. I'm thinking about how far I can push the idea of a photograph into painted work and still have it read as being photographic as opposed to a painting. I like making portraits, so those are painted portraits. I'm also making some work I'm calling "Liberty." I live in Liberty, Indiana on Union street [laughs]. It's a small town so I'm just making some portraits of people and kids in the community. I'm just starting. I have work that I've been gathering through the years too. But, it's just sort of a portrait project of the people in Liberty. Not just specifically Liberty, Indiana but "Liberty," to represent America. So, a couple of portrait projects is what I'm doing right now. And, trying to finish up this book.

CS: That's really awesome. I love your story! Thank you so much for sharing yourself with me.

JY: No problem!

CS: You know it's not an easy thing to tell your story and I really appreciate that.

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